EX-CHAMELEON by Ron Goulart

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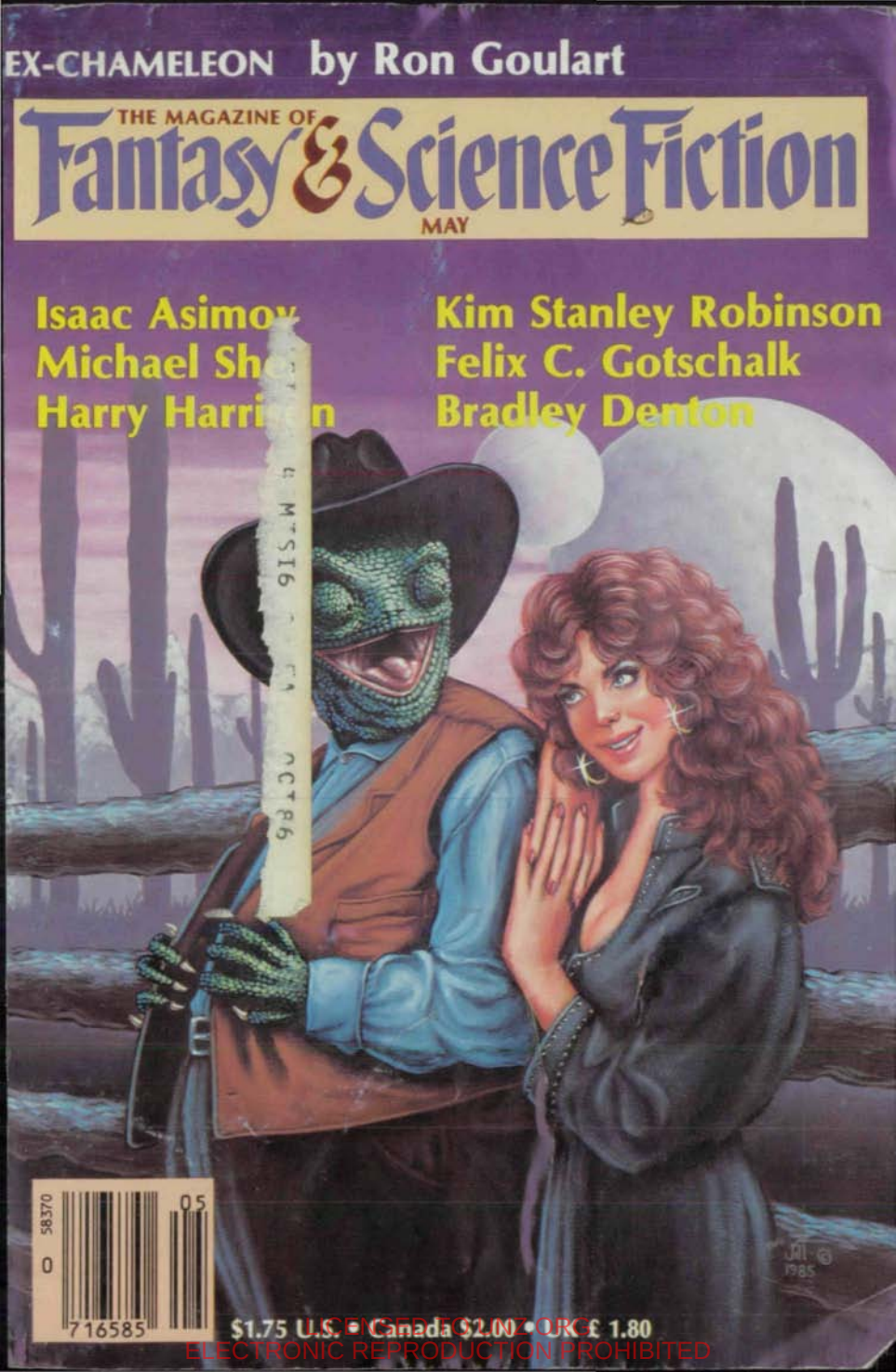

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 70, No. 5, Whole No. 420, May 1986. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.75 per copy. Annual subscription $19.50; $23.50 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

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If you follow horror fiction (or if you've read Algis Budrys's discussion of the genre in the last two issues), you know that Michael Shea is one of its most skillful and innovative practitioners. Yet here is something different even for Shea, a tale of backwoods terror that will have you rocking with laughter . . .

Uncle Tuggs

BY
MICHAEL SHEA

I

Now you should understand that when Gabe Tuggs offered me this job, I didn't like the idea of working for him. I didn't like getting into any kind of deal with any of those three Tuggs brothers, but right then my bank account was hurtin' for certain. I'd had like a great burst of energy take hold of me when I made so much money landscaping that spring. I started building that cabin Barbara's always bitching about — and with the kids getting so big now, the trailer does seem small, even with all the little rooms I've tacked onto it. Anyway, I'd poured the slab and had the packets of two-by-fours delivered: So right then, early that fall, there was a little freak rain, and the job calls stopped dead. A lot of people are just looking for any excuse to put off having work done till next spring. I'd been two weeks without a nibble. I still owed on the two-by-fours, and we had big dentist bills, and both my stakebed and my pickup needed new sets of tires.

So. When Gabe Tuggs came and found me in the Eight Ball off Courthouse Square and offered me this job, I said, "Hmmm." I said to him, "Gabe, why don't we have another beer while I weigh it in my mind?"

Gabe used the cast on his left hand for a hammer on the bar. He ordered two beers. "And a shooter of bourbon with mine, Lloyd," I told Lloyd. Gabe didn't say anything, just paid. He was tightfisted, so I could see now he really meant to talk business. The job was cutting fifty or sixty

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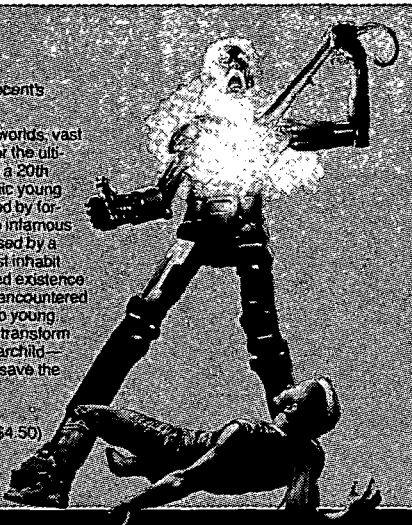

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trees on Uncle Tuggs's place to firewood, and I liked the deal. But I took my time drinking. I didn't want to answer too fast. I sat there a bit like I was just relaxing and savoring Lloyd's god-awful house bourbon.

Of course the truth was, I never could feel very relaxed sitting next to Gabe Tuggs. It's true he was the smallest of the three brothers. He stood not a hair over six feet two and was scarcely a yard wide. And if he weighed an ounce over 240, I'd eat the difference — and a nasty meal it would be. The thing was that what Gabe lacked in size he made up in meanness. His cast covered up one of his gaudier tattoos, but he had plenty of others showing — three-color tattoos with lots of teeth and tails and claws in them. A kind of burnt-leather-and-motor-oil smell came off of Gabe — his ponytail even had a kind of motor-oily look, and he always wore shades that were as black as a bug's eyes. He was the kind of guy that sitting next to him made you uneasy, like sitting next to a bear.

But anyway, I did like the deal. I could take one cord out for every cord I left to them. In October I could already get 140 for a cord that was only half splitters. If I pushed it, I could truck out two of those a day.

I also *trusted* the deal. I didn't trust the brothers, you understand — I trusted their situation, which was plain to anyone who thought about it. Since moving onto their Uncle Tuggs's place to caretake after he disappeared, they would have planted every shed and barn on it cram-full of prime skunkweed. No doubt of it. It'd be safe indoors from theft and law, and it'd be the readiest big cash they could make off the property. So. Waiting for harvest, with the grow-lights working overtime, they'd need cash in the short term for gas, drugs, booze, and food. What to do? Chop up and sell old Uncle's oaks and madronas. The boys would be living off all that wood all through the winter and spring. They'd have to play straight with their cutters and customers. And this was twice as true just now, with both Grant Tuggs, the oldest — and now Gabe, too — injured like they had been, and within a week of each other. Knowing Gabe from high school wouldn't have counted for anything if they'd wanted to cheat me, but their having to depend on that firewood for their octanes and their Jack Daniels and their elephant tranquilizers — that was what made me say to Gabe:

"Well, Gabe, I believe I could take on that job. Do I understand rightly that you've cut some kind of road so I can get my stakebed down into the draw?"

I knew Uncle's place since high school, from having my cars up there to be fixed from time to time, like a lot of people. It was six or seven acres, with the house and barn and sheds on about a half acre of fairly

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level ground, not far off the highway. Behind that the land dropped away to hilly ground with several draws winding through it with plenty of trees growing in them with lots of mid-sized scraggly stuff perfect for weeding out for firewood.

Gabe looked pissed at my question. He hammered the bar with his cast again. He said, "We got a roadcut down into the first draw. Goddamn dozer broke down right at the bottom. Still sittin' there, but you can get around it. Same," he told Lloyd.

I was impressed — I mean that he bought me another drink like that. I could see the boys really wanted someone they could trust on this job. I said:

"Boy, that's too bad. You guys really seem to be having some bad luck lately. How's Grant doin'?" I didn't quite dare ask about *his* break, but I looked at his cast when I asked about Grant's. He gave me that black bugeye like he was considering how it would be to twist my scalp off like a beer bottle cap. Though I'm kind of short, my cap's on pretty tight and might give him some trouble. It would sure hurt like hell to have him trying it out, though. Finally, not moving his lips much, Gabe says:

"They're changing his cast tomorrow."

Gabe had actually thought Grunt's accident was pretty funny when he had it — back before Gabe was hurt himself. He described it to Billy Vale, who he'd sometimes drink with, and Billy Vale described it to me. Old Grunt (Grunt was what we all called Grant behind his back) — Grunt decided to split up a heap of rollers they had by the house, so their own stoves would be taken care of.

Now Grunt had plenty of back for labor, but he didn't like it any better than his brothers did, so when he got inspired to some kind of work, he liked to jump on it, power through it, and get it over with. So Grunt honked up a couple foot-long rails of crank, and had five or six shooters of Cuervo Gold, and munched down some salt and lime slices, and fired up the splitter that old Uncle Tuggs had left behind, like he'd left behind almost all his other gear when he disappeared. Grunt starts plunking those rollers into the splitter and gets such a rhythm going that in no time he finishes the pile.

Grunt's breathing fire by now. He jumps into Uncle's old stakebed (which the front brakes are just about shot on, but what the hell) and goes jouncing down their little roadcut and into the draw. He lays about him with the chain saw and drives up another heap of rollers. He does some more shooters, munches a bunch more salt and lime slices, honks a couple more rails of crank, and fires the splitter back up. He starts feeding it rollers from off the truckbed, turning back and forth between the bed and the splitter. Well, the splitter's

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wheels are locked, but you know how they can creep sometimes? Except this one practically jumps — swings one end all the way around behind Grunt's legs so that he trips and falls backward across it as he turns from the truck with another roller. To top it off, just then the wedge goes into drive! And Grunt swore he never touched the drive lever when he fell, and it's hard to see how he *could* have. If he hadn't had so much crank in him, he'd never have hoisted his legs out of the way in time, and as it was, one of his feet snagged and the wedge nipped him just hard enough to crack his shinbone.

Anyway, I just shook my head sympathetically, about Grunt's cast and all. "Well, Gabe," I said, "I like your offer. I'll want to leave early enough each day to take my buyers their wood straight off my truck so I don't have to stockpile."

"Long as you leave the same amount you leave with every day, I *give* a shit. I want to start tomorrow morning. I'll be out to mark the trees for you."

I wanted to ask him what he was going to do, take a bite out of each one he wanted cut? "What about trucking *your* cords for you?" I asked him. "Will you want to hire me for that — I mean, since your truck's out?"

I thought this might make Gabe mad again because that was how he got hurt, you see, trying to change the front brake shoes on that truck, but he surprised me. He kind of looked off into the air. "Who knows?" he said. "Maybe we won't want to sweat the work ourselves. Let's just get some cut first. And remember, you're making two cords of splitters for us, too.,"

"No problem. I can use your splitter?"

Gabe shrugged. "If you want."

I wasn't sure I *did* want. I worked on my drink, thinking how it was no wonder the brothers seemed ready to hire out all the work, even selling their own cords. First you had their trouble with that splitter. Then you had Gabe's accident. He'd got that truck's front end up on Uncle's roll-under hydraulic pump-jack, laid under there and started hammering off the front left drum with a blunt chisel and a hand sledge. (He'd told Billy Vale this one, too, but he didn't laugh as much telling it as he did about Grunt's.) All of a sudden, *whoosh,* the pressure blows out of the jack and the truck sits on Gabe's face. He was lying on thick grass and he had the wheel lying under the axle, so his head wasn't mashed, but one of his hands got caught half-raised and he cracked two of the bones in it. And then, on top of all this, there was their grader breaking down, which I hadn't heard about. Put it all together, it was starting to seem like everything old Uncle Tuggs had left on the place was giving the brothers trouble.

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When Uncle and Cherry (his little honey) and Ralph (his big, mean, smelly old dog) disappeared early last summer, he took nothing but his old black repair van with him. Every vehicle, tool, or component known to man, or pieces of it, was left on his place, though a lot of it was scattered or rusted or hidden in a pile of parts. And none of it seemed to be doing the boys any good. I got up.

"Well, O.K., Gabe," I told him. "I'll see you in the morning. You guys hear anything from the sheriff yet?"

This question actually seemed to shock Gabe for a minute. I guess since him and his brothers had got the official search for Uncle and Cherry started in the first place — since they'd been waiting two months now with no results, and since it was actually three more months before that since Grunt had been the last person to see Uncle alive — why, the boys must just have given up any hope of ever seeing Uncle again, and must not even be thinking about it anymore.

"Hell," Gabe said after a minute. "They haven't found jack-shit."

As I drove home I thought about the job, and got more and more pleased with it. There were mucho cords in those draws. Once I got home I hadn't been on the phone fifteen minutes before I'd sold three cords, C.O.D., as soon as I could deliver.

• • •

II

A little after sunrise I drove my stake-bed up to Tuggs's yard. I knew that place pretty well, as I say, and right then, in that early sunlight, it seemed like a lot of years since I'd started bringing my first car up here — an old Plymouth. Hell, twenty years at least, in plain fact. In those days the brothers might be around, but it was Uncle everyone came up here to see. The boys had never lived here before now. When you thought about it, it was kind of funny, actually, that being called Uncle was the old man's own joke, from his kid sister having three such big sons. He'd sure stuck by the joke — *I* couldn't recall any other name for him — but the thing was, he was just the opposite of a family-minded man. He'd let his nephews hang around his place, but even though their mother did a lot of moving and drinking and remarrying, and they got shuffled around a lot, he'd never take them in even temporarily. He probably figured she'd try to scrape them off on him, and he probably was right, but even so, I could remember thinking it was funny how he didn't even seem to feel like an uncle toward them, even though he'd let them use his tools and fix their heaps at his place. For instance, there was that accident with Ronnie Partlett that had made Gabe

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Tuggs kind of famous when we were back in high school. He and Ronnie stole a bottle of bourbon from Gabe's stepdad, and took Ronnie's mom's car, and were driving all around one Friday night smashing mailboxes with a baseball bat they'd stolen from the school gym. Well, Gabe was driving, and Ronnie was leaning way out with the bat to smash a bunch of boxes that they were just coming up on, and all of a sudden a cat shoots across the road, and Gabe swerves to mash it, and poor Ronnie's head is jammed into those mailboxes. Gabe got a year on the youth farm, and I remembered being up here a couple days later and hearing Uncle talking about it with some other old fart that he was fixing his tractor for. The other guy said that Ronnie was no better than a vegetable now, for all intents and purposes, and Uncle laughed and said, yeah, but you had to be fair to Gabe, because Ronnie hadn't had that far to go in the first place. Which was God's truth. What struck me just then was how Uncle said it, like he saw Ronnie and Gabe on a par, and didn't feel any more involved with one than the other.

What Uncle did — even more than working here at his place — was ride a kind of circuit mechanic's route in an old black van jammed with tools. Back when I was a kid, he was already a strange, tall, skinny old guy that everybody's grandfather liked to joke and cackle with and everybody's grandmother disapproved of as being foul-mouthed but was also a little secretly tickled by. He was kind of like an old-time circuit preacher that prayed over cars and graders and trucks. He'd stand talking over an engine, jawing with the owner, as long as he ever spent touching it. But then, finally, just here and there, he'd give a little dab with a wrench, a little poke with the screwdriver, and ba-*room*!, the thing would be humming. Like a laying on of hands.

Also, the old goat always had some much younger woman (or chippy, as some people's mothers called them) living up here with him. He was a greasy, gangly, bump-throated old guy. He had a big, spade-shaped nose that came all the way down past his mouth, or seemed to. His mouth was wide, without all its teeth, and when he wasn't talking — when he was looking at an engine and thinking, his eyes far away — he had this sort of secret, lemon-sucking smile that always, as long as I could remember, set my teeth a little on edge. As I got older, and *he* got older, it surprised and irritated me more and more that he always had these younger women living with him. If after a while one of them stopped showing up around his place, no more than a week or so would pass and he'd have another one out there with the same nice big advantages on her as the one before her'd had. What sort of rubbed it all in, you might say, was that he loved to

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talk about what he did in bed with them. Or talk about what he'd *like* to do in bed with them, or talk about what he'd like to do in bed with any *other* woman who came to mind, or came in sight, at any moment. Old Uncle Tuggs liked to talk about screwing, or possible screwing, or even impossible screwing, in any way, shape, or form. The thing was, he had a *talent* for it. He had such a humorous, greedy, descriptive way of talking about it that you just had to listen, and laugh.

But it sort of hit me just then, looking at his old place, that I'd never really liked Uncle Tuggs. It surprised me. I mean, I guess I always knew I didn't like him, but the fact never stood out for me to notice it like it did now. There was something about him that I always thought was just like Ralph, his dog — dirty, bony, sneaky . . . *hungry* in some kind of strange way you couldn't put your finger on, with his eyes like they were circling you, hanging back, spying at you and laughing.

Gabe came out of the barn. He had two chain saws by their grip bars in one hand and a can of gas under the arm with the cast. As I pulled up to let him in, I could see that they had walled off a back part of the barn, and so were probably growing dope back there, too, as well as in all the sheds (you could hear a generator going somewhere — Walter had been into town to buy a new one, so the one Uncle'd left must have broken down). Gabe got in, and I drove us down past the old stakebed sitting nose to the grass where the jack gave out, and down to the edge of the nearest draw.

The roadcut down into it *was* rough, and that little John Deere was right bang at the bottom of it, its skiploader shoved halfway into the dirt for another bite when it died. You had to admit it was bizarre. The last time it had been used before that it had worked fine. Grant had come up to grade off some old weedy dirt piles from a cellar and septic tank dug years before — I guess Uncle just didn't feel like doing it himself for some reason — and that in fact was the last time anyone had seen Uncle, because when Grunt came back the next day to finish up, he said he found Uncle, Cherry, Ralph, and the van all gone. Anyway, three months later, after the brothers decided it was time the law looked into this (and a lot of people by this time were wondering), and after the sheriff O.K.'d their caretaking the place, they no sooner fire the John Deere up again to develop the property's cash potential a little, and *bam* it breaks down. I was just able to edge my truck out around it and onto the draw bottom.

"Well, Gabe," I told him, "this gravel feels pretty firm — I shouldn't have any trouble getting down-draw a ways."

"Forget it. You're cuttin' up here. Just get all these fuckers at the head

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of the draw here."

Old Gabe sure had a friendly, winning way about him. Why the hell did he need to mark the trees at all if that was what he wanted? Turned out — as I was breaking out my twelve-pack of Buckhorn, rolling up my sleeves, and firing up the bigger chain saw — that he didn't bother with marking trees, just took one of my beers and sat on a rock and started watching, like I was free TV.

I went to work. I dropped a half dozen smaller trees that would be in the way of falling the bigger ones later on. I trimmed the lettuce off them and dragged it out of the way and started cutting them into rollers. All this time Gabe was watching me, looking broody. After a while I see it's the chain saw he's actually watching. After a half hour or so, he gets up, pins the other saw with his foot, and starts it with his good hand.

"Hey!" he tells me, "use this awhile! I don't like that one to overheat."

Well, this is bullshit, the saw was fine. But I didn't want to lose my stride, so I just put the one down, took the other, and kept going. Gabe took another one of my beers, sat down on a madrona I'd cut, and started watching *that* saw. After a while I stopped for a rest.

"Mind if I switch back to the big one now, Gabe?" I asked him. "It goes faster."

Sullen, like it hurt his mouth to ask it, Gabe said, "Seem to you like either one of them pulls?"

"Pulls? Left or right?"

"Left *or* right!" he shouts — I'm surprised how suddenly worked up he was. "Up *or* down! Pulls *any* direction!"

I waited a minute. "Why, no, Gabe," I said very calmly. "I've got to say I haven't felt either one of these saws pull particularly in any direction at all whatsoever."

He just grunted, but I could've sworn he looked relieved. I went back to work with the bigger saw, and he didn't mention overheating anymore. Gabe watched and drank my beer. I had figured a twelve-pack would last me till lunch, but the cheap bastard drank three of my beers, and by eleven I'd run dry. I made a big deal about emptying the last can, but hints are wasted on any Tuggs. Just then from up at the house came the sound of someone firing up a car, and I said to Gabe:

"Is that Walter? Going out? Could you get him to bring back another twelve-pack?"

"Walter's not here. That's Grant. He won't be back till late, he's going to get his cast changed."

"Well, have you got any beers in the house, Gabe? It's getting kind of thirsty out, and it looks like I've just run dry."

Good old Gabe just shrugged. "Fuck if I know," he said cheerfully.

I went back to falling some more

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trees. I decided at noon I'd drive out for another twelver, and this one I was going to lock in my cab and take out can by can so that even a Tuggs would get the point. And then the strangest thing happened that I've ever had happen with a chain saw — and I mean including the time I lost this joint of my finger here, right? I'd started on this little oak, you see. It had two main branchings that pushed out at its neighbors so as to give it a tricky kind of torque, but it had a definite lean out over the draw bottom that should control its fall. Well, what happened was that when I touched the saw to begin the undercut, the saw had an incredible power surge, and ripped clear through the trunk with one backhanded stroke!

Now this can't happen. Certainly not on an undercut like that. The shift and pinch of the trunk as its support gets cut through would trap the biggest saw just like *that*. You have to get the weight of the tree hanging with the undercuts, but then you cut through the back of this stress and the tree snaps forward off the saw — it's the only way to do it.

Except it did happen. Can you picture the kind of acceleration I'm talking about? The blade just roared straight through the tree — I'd still swear that kind of power just physically was not *in* that saw. It sliced the trunk at a crazy angle, and the tree pitches down, flips off the hang-up of one of its boughs on the next tree, and twists sideways as it whops down the rest of the way, bang-square on the tree that Gabe was perched on.

Gabe had lots of fast in him, like all the Tuggs. He'd just jumped off when the oak came down and clamped him facedown across the madrona, chest and right arm pinned, head and left arm poking out on the other side. And as if things weren't strange already, the impact itself was strange. The oak fell on one of its two branchings, which snapped off but didn't break off, and acted like a kind of hinge, letting the oak down just enough to pinch Gabe solid, but also giving just enough support so that no more than two or three of his ribs were cracked at most. When his head cleared and his eyes focused again, he started to swear something terrible.

"God*damn*, Gabe," I told him. "You weren't just woofin' when you asked about it pulling! Did you *see* how this thing yawed on me?"

Gabe kept on swearing, and it sounded weird because what he was saying was so fierce and yet his voice was almost quiet at the same time, because it hurt him too much to fill his lungs and roar. I was really sorry a thing like this had happened to a guy like Gabe with me *involved* in its happening. Of course he himself had seemed to suspect his chain saws were acting up, but he was the kind of guy that if you broke a couple of his ribs, he was going to hold it

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against you no matter what. He'd just spent too many of his years running elephant tranquilizers and crystal meth with other crazy bikers, and *doing* them, to have much sense of the fine point of a case left in him. I studied how to cut him free.

"Look here, Gabe," I told him. "A lot of the weight's from this other side branch here. I'll lop it off and maybe the oak will rise off you some."

"Cut me the fuck outa here, you fuckin' clown! Ow!" Gabe said — he'd shouted too loud. I laid the blade to that side branch, and the saw sank through it smooth and normal as you please. A good three hundred pounds' weight dropped free. But goddamn if that oak didn't lift at all. By some freak twist in it, the trunk actually seemed to press a shade harder on poor Gabe.

"Well, at least this saw's behaving O.K. now, Gabe," I told him. "I guess I'll try cutting that branch above you, and maybe then I'll be able to —"

"GET — THIS — THING — OFF — ME!" Gabe screeched, and then had to groan, it hurt so much to do it. The branch wasn't a main one but was hefty, and I might be able to push up the oak with it off and just lift it enough for Gabe to pull himself out. His head stuck out just below and to one side of the branch, so I got on its opposite side and reached the blade up.

"Keep your eyes shut," I advised him, "because this sawdust is going to be coming down around your head." Gabe just groaned again and ground his teeth. I gunned the saw and set it to the branch.

Right there — right then — things started to go bad in a big way. It was like when I touched the saw to that branch, a kind of nightmare started, and kept on, getting worse and worse, until — well, I'm going to describe it all to you in just the order it happened in.

I touch the saw to the bough, right? It sinks maybe halfway in, lulling me, getting me off guard — and then it has another one of those unreal power surges! It whips — I mean *whips* — through the rest of the branch in a second. I can't unsqueeze the trigger! I can't let go the grip! *Zip* through the bough and on down — *chonk*-zoom — clean through poor Gabe Tuggs's neck. That saw moved so fast that Gabe's head and the bough hit the ground at just about the same second, and I just had time to free my hands and pull back before the branch hit my arms — and it did hit the chain saw right where I dropped it and smashed it dead.

I stood cursing, but I was in kind of a trance, too. I walked around the trees, and on the other side of them I walked up and down, helpless, shaking my head and swearing. I was using my voice to drown out the awful noise of Gabe's bleeding on the other side of that tree sandwich. From this side he might just be some guy peace-

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fully bent over a fence or something that you were seeing from behind — except for that oak tree on him, of course. But I could still see in my mind the horrible way he was cut off short on the other side. I made myself stand still. I took a deep breath and blew it out.

"Brother," I told myself out loud, "this is the worst luck you've ever had in a long and distinguished *career* of bad luck, and you better get a grip on yourself because now you have really got your ass in a crack."

I never talk to myself out loud like that, and the fact that I was doing it just shows how blown away my mind was, but somehow it helped me, and so I went on:

"You're going to have to hide poor Gabe. Bury him. Because there's no way Walter or Grunt Tuggs is going to accept a reasonable explanation of how this tragic mishap happened. So you're going to have to come in tomorrow, and tell them that after Grunt left for the hospital, Gabe took off somewhere and still hadn't showed up before you left with your wood."

I sounded reasonable to myself, and it got me moving. I went back around the trees. But I was still like in shock. All I could do for a while was stare at those remains and the horrible mess of blood they had sprayed on the ground and a lot of the wood. And then when I made myself move again, all I could think of to do was pick up poor Gabe's head by the ponytail and hide it in a manzanita bush — pretty ridiculous with the whole rest of him still clamped between those trees. The oak lay longwise on the madrona, almost aligned to it. To keep from binding the saw or from mangling the body any worse, the neatest way to cut him out would be to chop that oak to rollers from its crown, the nearest end.

"All right, then," I told myself, "chop it to rollers, pull him free and bury him, and use the shovel to bury the blood, too. Then get the bloody rollers on the flatbed first, cover them with the clean ones you'll have just cut, and get the hell out of here before Grunt or Walter comes back."

I felt encouraged — I was still making sense. Down the draw a little way was the mouth of a ravine that Grunt Tuggs had shoved the dirt piles into when he graded them off for Uncle. The loose heap spilled right out into the draw and should be easy to bury Gabe in.

My mind felt like it was clicking again. I fired up the smaller saw and set to the crown of that oak, dropping it roller by roller. This saw hadn't acted up yet, but you can bet I kept it well away from me while I worked.

I don't want you to think that all through this I wasn't feeling some personal regret for Gabe as a man. No matter what kind of scumbug a person might be, they have some human characteristics, too, usually, and you should try to come up with these and

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give them their due when they pass on. So I tried to remember Gabe's high points while I worked, though I'd never stayed in touch with him. I remember while I was still in the service hearing how him and Walter had got together as septic tank contractors. They and two guys they subbed part of their work to apparently had a knack for getting things out of the houses they worked at. Then there was a divorced lady and her daughters had a big place in the hills where these boys were setting a tank for an extra wing she was adding. Maybe the lady was too trusting, too sociable, but Gabe and the boys, who had some bottles on hand, let the day turn into a kind of wild party and all four got sent up for Rape forcible and Rape statutory and Breaking and Entering and some other things. And from what I heard afterward here and there, both Walter and Gabe used every opportunity to work on their rape techniques while they were in the joint.

Well, after that? I seemed to remember they all got of the joint within a year of each other — Grunt was already up-country in another state for a second-degree murder — and got together on something. Yes, that would be the garage they leased near Courthouse Square in Healdsburg. Now there was an example — Gabe wasn't charged with anything on that one, though there were some Mexican car-clubbers got shot outside of town by someone, and Grunt did go up again, for receiving stolen goods. On the other hand, you couldn't really give Gabe too much credit for that, because everyone knew he would've gone up, too, if they'd been able to get enough evidence on him. Anyway, after that Gabe and Walter were running crank down around L.A. I knew that from Billy Vale, who'd met Gabe while he was in jail for it, and went in with him awhile when Gabe went back to it after he got out.

It began to sink in to me how much the brothers tended to stay together in spite of their various adventures. Would they really buy my story that Gabe had just taken off? And wouldn't I have to get rid of his chopper to make them believe it even for a little while? Could I ramp it up onto my stakebed and cover it with rollers? It made me feel a little panicky. Christ! Could I get all this done in time? I raised my saw to start a new cut, and from up near the house I heard the roar of a car pull in.

Oh, perfect! Oh, fine! That had to be Walter! I was so stupefied by this new bad luck, I just kept cutting. I dropped a roller, started another one. I heard Walter's motor cut off, his car door bang shut, then a house door bang. I just kept cutting.

III

It was like one of those nightmares where you're supposed to be hiding

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from these people, but your cover is just too thin and all the time you're really blatant. And somehow they keep on not seeing you, but at any second they just *have* to see you. I just kept standing there cutting my way toward poor Gabe and the big red splotch on the ground in front of him. Up at the house another door banged. Over the saw, in a pause between cuts, I could just make out the sound of someone sifting through tools near one of the sheds.

I was maybe five cuts from springing Gabe's trunk. Would my luck hold? After I hid him, I'd still have to get a shovel to cover the blood. I heard an engine fire up in the yard. It wasn't Walter's car — it was shriller. And then Walter howled and I heard him screeching and swearing.

It wouldn't be natural for me to ignore that noise — he'd expect me to come running up there to see what happened. For a minute, though, it was impossible for me to move, every ounce of me was so unwilling to leave the body so obvious like that for anyone to see who came to the edge of the yard. But at last I made myself trot on up to the yard, the chain saw idling in my hand.

There was Walter, standing by a rusty, stripped-down V-8 engine Uncle had left sitting on a block of wood in the grass. One of his hands was bloody — Walter was clutching it and cursing a blue streak. And damned if the fan blades on that derelict weren't still spinning!

"What the hell happened, Walter?"

Walter was a lot bigger than Gabe — almost as big as Grunt — but he didn't wear his hair like his older and younger brothers did. His was dude-hair, and his face was shaved, which let you see all the dings and chunks taken out of it. Right now Walter Tuggs looked amazed.

"I was takin' the fuckin' distributor cap! The fuckin' engine fired up!"

"Jesus, Walter! That is *bizarre!*"

Walter looked at me. The whites were showing all the way around his mean little gray eyes. Between each word he said, his jaw kind of sagged, like it wanted to hang. "*Bizarre?*" he said. "*Bizarre?* What the fuck do you *mean* bizarre?"

"I mean *strange*, Walter. I mean, Jesus Christ, that's *strange.*"

"Strange? *Strange?* You're fuckin'-aye-straight it's strange! That sucker's amputated! There's no *gas*!"

What could I say? He was right! That fan had mauled a lot of skin off his knuckles, but it was that kind of thing that is so surprising that it blots out pain for a while. I still didn't like to see Walter Tuggs bleeding like that. In just pure disposition, you'd have to say he was the meanest of the brothers. True, he did skunkweed and reds to such an extent that a lot of the time he seemed more amazed than mean. But he had a way of getting confused, and if he stayed confused about any one thing long

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enough, then he turned mean. Luckily his memory was so short he usually forgot what was confusing him pretty quick, but bleeding like he was was likely to keep the confusing fact that a dead engine had mauled him on Walter's *mind*.

But he didn't get steamed up. No! Walter surprised me. He looked at that V-8 and said, fairly quietly, "So fuck your fuckin' distributor. *Be* that way! I'll just go trim the fuckin' dope." Then he just turned and walked toward the toolshed. It was the oddest thing, like he had some running argument with that motor, or with something in it — an argument he was so involved in he didn't even notice he'd copped to their dope crop right in front of me.

I figured I should keep an eye on Walter for a few minutes to see that he settled into something. I killed off the saw and set it down, and went to the shed where he was tying a rag around his hand and got out a double-bitted ax.

"I'm gonna do some of your splits now, Walter. Then I'm gonna haul a load of rollers out of the draw for myself."

He just shrugged. I went over to the rollers piled by the back porch near the splitter — which, the way things were going, there was no way I was going to use — and started setting them on end and splitting them. I warmed up to the ax work, and my mind started moving again. How big would their dope be? Two months old, dating from the day they moved in. There'd be some spraying as well as trimming to do, and all those downers made Walter a slow worker. He'd be at it an hour. If I could just get back down to the draw for another twenty minutes, I could spring Gabe and hide him and the worst of the blood. Then I could settle to clean up in more detail, because then even if Walter did come to the edge of the yard, he'd miss anything that didn't outright kick him in the face.

So I kept splitting. I've always liked splitting madrona — it's so red the cross cuts look like steaks. It's crisp and kind of waxy and splits clean with one good stroke: *whack*-plop, *whack*-plop, *whack*-plop. The splitters fell apart rosy and mellow in the sunlight. I was just starting to feel I might get out of this mess if I stayed cool.

Meanwhile Walter had found a pair of hand shears in the shed and was working them to get the rustiness out of them. He worked them and worked them, already looking like his usual vacant self again: *eee*-eee, *eee*-eee, *eee*-eee. In the noon quiet and the fine sunshine, the two of us made a funny, peaceful kind of music: *whack*-plop, *eee*-eee, *whack*-plop, *eee*-eee.

An inspiration came to Walter. He rummaged in the shed again and got a spray can of Liquid Wrench. Holding this he wandered toward the barn,

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spraying the shears and still working them as he went: *eee*-eee, *eee*-eee. And right there, just as he got to the barn door, Walter had one of the strangest accidents I've ever seen. Not worst, but strangest, and coming from me that ought to mean something. Maybe the shears were slippery from the Liquid Wrench, but as he worked them faster they suddenly snapped open so hard they flipped out of his grip, spun end over end straight down, and sank one blade all the way through Walter's shoe and foot and it must have been another inch on into the ground.

For a minute Walter froze. He stood and gaped at his foot like it had betrayed him. Then he hoisted the foot, shears and all, off the ground and started hopping around on his other foot and roaring. He roared some things there's no need to repeat, things — and combinations of things — that I'd never even thought of. The kind of things I guess you need a pair of shears through your foot to help you think up. I ran over to him.

"Sit down, Walter. Against the barn here!"

"------- -- ----- ------- ----- -- -----!"

"That's it, scoot back this way a little more. Lean back on the wall here! That's it!"

"------ --- --------- ------- -----!"

"Hold that knee straight now. Lock it!" I told him. I planted one of my feet against his toes to hold his foot rigid, and then I hauled the shears out of him. He slammed the barn wall with his head, cracking one of the planks. When his eyes had cleared a little, he said:

"In the kitchen. Counter. Jack Daniels."

"Good idea!" I told him. "Get your shoe off and we can pour some in the hole!"

"Fuck the hole!" Walter screeched. "I'm gonna drink it!"

Just the same he started working on his laces, and I hurried through the back door into the kitchen, and when I got to that JD bottle I took some of Walter's advice and had a long pull off it. I found a sixer of Buckhorn in their icebox and had one of them and half another as a chaser. I watched poor Walter from the window, loosening his shoelaces gingerly, like they were snakes that might bite him. I took another pull, finished my beer, and cracked another.

"Can you believe a day like this?" I asked myself. I felt like I was a stranger I had to give advice to and couldn't think of what to tell him. "They talk about accident-prone?" I asked. "Those aren't just empty words. It seems like every tool or gadget on this place has it in for these boys."

Just then the coldest kind of a shudder went straight through me — up from the floor I stood on and right out through my scalp, and it was like Uncle Tuggs was standing right there

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with me. I mean, I was still looking out the window, seeing Walter ease his shoe off and get some reds out of his vest pocket and swallow them, but what I was really seeing was Uncle Tuggs's face. I was feeling him in my guts, the smell of his dirty kitchen was the smell of Uncle himself in my nostrils. And he had this particular look on his face that I'd seen there again and again over the years, and it hit me now that it was that look that somehow summed up Old Uncle Tuggs—got right at the gist of him. It was the look he'd have when he'd just fixed some immediate problem on whatever car I had at the time. Well, that takes care of that, he'd say, but before long that X or Y of yours is going to go and then you might as well just shitcan the whole rig. And we'd stand there, both of us knowing he was right, and both knowing I'd never have the money to fix that X or Y — and his oily black eyes would be laughing in just this particular way. And now I could feel the meaning in that look like never before — that deep inside Uncle gloated more over knowing how things broke than knowing how to fix them.

It was truly scary — I could see Cherry, too, in a manner of speaking. I mean with that same feel of the smell and rub of her. A little honey about my age, ex-flower child, with the kind of advantages on her that back in high school it would have blown every zit on my face to get my hands on — but her eyes were missing! Right at the centers they were dead and gone, so that you couldn't picture them. It really went through me. Uncle's other honeys? What about them? Could I remember their eyes? Walter was bellowing for me. As I took him out the whiskey and beer, I told myself:

"Calm down now. Just stay cool. This is actually good luck. He won't go wandering around now and look in the draw."

Walter got out some more reds and washed them down with the JD. Then he drank a beer at one breath. He settled back against the barn and gave me a serious look. "This place, man," he told me, "is trying to *ambush* me. This whole fucking *place.*" He looked off into space, nodding a sort of a just-you-wait nod. He chugged more JD and brooded over his thoughts. Old Walter's thoughts, few though they might be, could often occupy him for hours at a time. Things were looking up. I'd work here just until I saw his reds kick in, then get down into the draw and clean up.

"Listen, Walter," I told him. "You want a ride to the hospital? Because I'll take you down in my truck as soon as I make up a load. I'll split a few more here, and then I'll go down and make up the load." Walter nodded — he looked vague already.

I went back to splitting. This shouldn't take long — *whack*-plop. Then I'd come back here from the

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hospital after dropping him off — *whack*-plop. Get Gabe's keys and just *drive* his chopper off the place — *whack*-plop. Hide it somewhere nearby and run back — *whonk*.

It was just the ax handle that I hit that one with, and it made my elbows pop. The head had flown off the handle slick as snot. It *whistled*, it spun so straight. It sank its whole length into the center of Walter Tugg's chest. He'd been sitting with one hand laid sort of loose across his chest, and so two of his fingers got clipped off just as neat as you could imagine and rolled down onto his lap. Walter's eyes and mouth came wide open, he sat up, and then fell back, stone-dead.

IV

It seemed like I'd never move again. Like the sun would set, the moon would rise, Grunt would come home and call the sheriff — and I'd just be standing there through it all, that ax handle in my hands, poor Walter in front of me, and poor old Gabe down in the draw, sandwiched between two trees with his head behind a manzanita bush. Except of course Grunt would just blow me away himself and bury me down in the draw — he'd make no bones about that kind of thing. And it seemed like I *did* stand there forever, and without a single idea in my head how to save myself.

And then, straight out of that like trance, I started to move — to clean things up — and it was bizarre how smoothly I started doing everything, how suddenly I was moving and wasn't wasting a move. I tossed the ax handle in the toolshed, dragged out a piece of carpet Uncle had used to lie under cars on, took it over to Walter, tucked his two fingers into his vest pocket with his reds, and laid him on the carpet. It was amazing how little he bled — I guess because his heart had stopped pumping in a split second. I dragged him over to the road. Big though he was, it still seemed impossible one man could be so heavy.

I dragged him down the road into the draw. I ran back up, got the JD and cans of beer, drained them all, and threw them on a trash heap with a lot of others of their kind. I got the chain saw and a pick and shovel and ran back down into the draw with them. I set them down near Gabe, grabbed Walter's rug again, dragged it as far as the manzanita, got poor Gabe's head by the ponytail and put it on Walter's lap, and dragged both of them still deeper into the draw.

Near where that slide was, where Grunt had dozed a gully full with Uncle's old dirt piles, was a clump of bushes, and I hid Walter and Gabe's head behind it. I ran back up the draw with the carpet, laid it near Gabe's feet, fired the chain saw back up, and started to get the rest of the oak off him.

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I couldn't progress so fast in this part of the work. I forced myself to make twenty-inch cuts because I'd need lots of clean rollers to hide the bloody wood in the truck, but I had to clench my teeth to keep from bellowing out the fear that was in me now. It was like being trapped in a film that had slowed down. All the shadows in the draw looked darker and cooler, and I overdrove the chain saw to keep from hearing this bizarre, thick *quiet* that was welling like a flood out of the ground, like it might fill the draw and close over my head and snuff out even the chain saw's noise like a candle flame. Crazy? I *was* crazy! I kept seeing Uncle. With Grunt, and after him the law to be afraid of, and all the tricky moves I had to plan, it was that old goat that kept pushing himself into my mind. Just like a goat, too — the way one might push its clammy muzzle against your hand, wanting something from you? It *was* a cold, sweaty nudge — his face shoved against my mind with a scary, skin-rub feeling. And it was those months the brothers had their garage scam going that I especially remembered him from. There was that same gloating smile, but watching his nephews this time. It was only his donating some talent, dropping around to help every few days, that kept any straight customers coming after the first month or so.

And he hadn't had any part in the boys' cheats. No. What he was there to do showed in that smile if you really saw it: to enjoy the spectacle of the boys at their loser's racket. He knew that if some housewife stopped in with a nice new car, she'd drive it off with a big bill and with her carburetor and battery and what-all replaced by used junk. He knew about their rip-off contracts with those cholos that eventually got shot. *He* was hanging around for the show, giving the boys' setup a shove now and then to keep it rolling — just like he'd give an engine that finicky, kind of disdainful jab with a screwdriver or poke with a wrench. That was how Uncle had fun. People always assumed it was by tinkering things to life, but actually it was by keeping things going so that he could watch them dying longer. I dropped the piece that had Gabe pinned. He sagged down to his knees and flopped back on the carpet.

Even so tragically shortened, Gabe was like an oak stump to pull, but now I felt like the film was speeded back up and I could move ahead of my feelings again. I left Gabe behind the bushes with his head and Walter. I ran back and grabbed the shovel. I started scooping sand from where it was thick on the draw bottom and slinging it over the drag marks and the blood splotches and salting it over the bloody rollers. They looked crusty, but it killed the color. I tossed the smashed saw on the truckbed and started tossing those rollers on after it. Big sugary clots of sand drizzled

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off that raw-meat madrona as it bounced on the bed, and in that late light it all looked like a nightmare you might have after gorging yourself on rare roast beef and jelly doughnuts. I had to rest before starting to throw the clean rollers on to cover the mess. I looked up and was completely stunned. The sun was setting! Just one red half of it was left, all webbed over by the black branches of oak trees.

I jumped. I spun. I made those rollers rise and fly into the truck, but as fast as I could move wasn't half fast enough. The fear was truly big in me now — and still not of Grunt, or the law, but of Uncle — like he could somehow catch up with me, grab me, and stop me dead in the middle of this awful work of mine. When the clean wood I'd cut was loaded, it wasn't enough to cover the mess, so I started lopping off some more. The first roller I dropped, the sun went with it. The sky was still light, but now all the shadows ran together in the draw. I gritted my teeth and kept cutting, and remembered Uncle's eyes. His eyes as he'd been telling you where he'd like to stick his tongue and his fingers in some woman passing by just then — his little lemon-sucking smile as he told you about it, as he rubbed the balls of his mind against your ears, *tinkering* with your mind just as he tinkered with his nephews' customers' cars, smiling as he watched the boys — so blatant and so dumb — hassle, cheat, steal, and strong-arm their way back to jail. His eyes as he sat in his van, fingering the back of Cherry's neck as they drove by, tinkering with her nerves as he steered. And *her* eyes while he did it, looking empty and dismantled, like clocks with their hands stripped off. I stopped cutting. I didn't really have enough, but to hell with it. I wasn't going to be able to make myself stay down here much longer.

I killed the saw, loaded my cuts, and set in and bolted my truck's tailgate. I stood there in the quiet that had closed right back in like a pool, and in the shadows that now were also like a pool that I was sunk in way over my head, with my feet turned to lead. I didn't want to go down that draw to do my last piece of work. They lay there waiting for me to take hold of them and wrestle them into the dirt, and I had to say something, to hold their silence off at arm's length.

"O.K.," I said. "There you boys lie, and I've got to bury you now and get out of here fast. And first I'm going to have to get your scooter's key out of your pocket, Gabe. I *really* hate doing this. But you know, deep down, that all this was a tragic mishap — I mean, if you know anything, you know that it's something *he* . . . something Uncle . . ."

I knew as I said it that I shouldn't say his name, and no sooner *did* I say it than he was there. Standing right behind me.

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My heart nearly sneezed a piston. I screeched and jumped and spun around — and saw the draw was empty. No one was there but me, my stakebed, and that busted John Deere. I stood down in that lagoon of shadows, my heart still thudding back into place, and listened to the cricket noise start nibbling at the edges of all that cold, creaky quiet. I shook myself. I took up the pick and shovel and ran down to where the boys were hidden.

It was eerie getting Gabe's key out of his pocket with his face staring at me from off to one side, where it sat on Walter's lap. But I got it, and stood up. I felt wired to work again, felt like with just a little more hustle I might still get my ass out of here alive. I grabbed the pick and swung it against that dirt slide.

Burying them in that slide was one of those ideas that looks good at a fast glance, but the minute you start doing it you can see why it stinks. The loose dirt kept pouring onto what I dug out, as any idiot would expect from a slide. I swung the pick like a propeller, stabbed out dirt by the bushel with that shovel, ground my teeth and grunted and sweated — and all I was doing was dragging that whole pile farther and farther out onto the draw bottom.

So I tried to put less back in it —ease the dirt out till I'd opened just enough of a notch in the slope to hide the boys in. I couldn't do it! The least little bit I moved them, the pick and shovel seemed to *jump* with it. They yanked my shoulders sore trying to hold back their lunges at the slide. I was staggering, swearing, and losing every single stroke of the battle. It was like fighting the buck of a power tool, and these were just dead wood and steel. Finally I flung that shovel down, kicked it, cursed it, and stomped on it. I stood there trying to catch my breath, and right then, up by the house, I heard a car's engine cut off and its door open.

V

I was petrified. I'd totally missed any sound it'd made coming in. I stopped breathing to listen. I heard the door thunk shut, and heavy, limping steps move toward the house. I breathed again.

Let Grunt get inside the house. Let him get inside and shut the door, I told myself. Then sling a pile on the boys just where they lie — enough to keep the flies off. Then fire up the truck and drive the hell out of here. If Grunt comes out to ask, idle just long enough to say Walt and Gabe went off with someone who came by around noon. You were in the draw, didn't see them, just heard a car and some conversation you couldn't make out, then Gabe came to the edge of the draw and said if he and Walter didn't

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get back here before dark, just to take your wood on out, so that's what you were doing.

All this came to me in the space of a half dozen of those steps I heard moving toward the house. That just showed how wound tight I was. I was so deep in shit I couldn't feel the new waves hit me anymore, just rolled with them. The steps got hollow, climbing and crossing the back porch. Four, three, two more and he'd reach the back door. That was when, right in front of me, the pick jumped off the ground, twirled in the air, and *chunk* — started chopping at the slide all by itself, while the shovel came up on its nose, twirled, and *chonk* — stabbed into the dirt beside the pick. The click and rasp and clank of them rose so biting clear above the cricket noise — such an age-old, unmistakable sound — it seemed you could hear it clear to Healdsburg. Up on the porch the footsteps stopped. There was a long pause while those tools worked and nothing else moved anywhere on old Uncle's acres. Then came the footsteps again — creak-*thock,* creak-*thock* — heading back off the porch and down the steps they had just climbed.

I still wasn't moving. I was *with* those god-awful tools, you see, not three yards from where they hung in midair tearing that slide apart. The terrible magic moving them was like a thickness in the air around them, and it held me fast like a bug in jelly. Not that I didn't finally understand what was happening on this place. I saw it now, I got the gist of it, and I realized that pick and shovel weren't going to bother turning on me, because they had their own row to hoe, but I couldn't move anyway. My legs just wouldn't thaw out. I watched them hack and chew, all alone in the shadowy air, and I listened to Grunt's steps coming back. He stopped, the car's trunk popped open, something clanked slightly, the trunk was shut and the steps came on.

It was dark in the draw now, but straight overhead — where I looked like a drowning man might — the sky was still blue and the first star had just showed in it. There was a little piece of my mind like that star, up there apart from me looking down on the mess I was in, and it told me that when Grunt had paused up on the porch there, that pause had lasted too long. Too long for him just to be identifying what this noise was. This noise meant something particular to old Grunt. Though his steps were nearer now, they were quieter — the little grinding noises of his 280 pounds gimping across the grass to the draw. The tools had that dirt pouring down like winter runoff onto the draw bottom. Right then as I was watching, like an island in a stream, a corner of black metal poked out of that runoff.

I moved then. I got my feet unrooted, and after that it was easy — I

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felt so light and small compared to the power that hummed through those tools. I was quick and quiet as a fish in that pool of darkness — I slipped up the opposite slope and behind some oaks. I didn't want to stay even that near to what those tools were uncovering, but there came Grunt Tuggs, limping down the roadcut, a twelve-gauge pump-riot in his right hand, which made that shotgun look no bigger than a breadstick.

Dear Christ, old Grunt was big. Barrel-gutted though beer had made him, his shoulders still made his belly look small. He was balding on top, so his ponytail started from a kind of equator around the back of his head. His face had that full-moon look — puffy with little slitty crafty-mean eyes, like a samurai gone to seed on bad sake. He stopped at the foot of the roadcut and leaned against the John Deere, hoisting the leg with the cast on it so he could dangle and rest it a minute. That cast was so clean and new and white, and the bulk of Grunt was so oily-dark, bristly, and mean, that it was a little comical-looking somehow, like a party hat on a grizzly.

From where he was he couldn't see the tools past those bushes down the draw, but he knew my truck, and he bellowed out my name. The pick and shovel paused, like a man would do that was startled. It made a shiver go right through me. Then they started digging again. They made the dirt river down wider and wider off that black island. It was the tail end of a black van, tilted almost upside down in its grave. If it hadn't been for that shotgun, I would have run. Grunt called out again. His voice was like a grader blade breaking dirt:

"Step out where I can see you, sucker, or I'm gonna cut your ass in half. Willy? You hear me? Stop digging and step out!"

When the tools didn't stop, he started walking down the draw, his moonface bright in the dark, his eyes creased almost shut with his anger. And not just anger, maybe. Maybe a touch of worry, too. Yes. A touch of something I'd never seen on the face of Grunt Tuggs before. And then he stopped, and stared, seeing what made the noise he'd thought was me.

His head came back and his mouth opened a little. A shudder went through him as he watched the dirt trickling off the old black chassis lying wheels-up. Then his hands remembered the shotgun. He shook his head and heaved his shoulders like throwing off weight.

"All right, then, old man!" he shouted. His voice was sharp with a touch of a wild laugh in it. "O.K.! If that's how you want it! I've *still* got plenty of shells. Plenty left. So whatever it takes!" And he pumped off a wad of double-ought that slammed spang against that shovel's head and set it twirling like a ballerina on its toe.

But just *like* a dancer, it stayed

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balanced, and spun to a sudden stop. It tipped back once for some thrust and launched itself end over end through the air. That shovelhead swatted Grunt a smack upside the ear that rang like a churchbell, and that I *know* you could hear down in Healdsburg. Meanwhile the pick had swung up like a pendulum and clouted Grunt's head sideways — clubwise — knocking it halfway back to where the shovel had smacked it from, and dropping him on the ground.

Grant got up on one elbow, shaking his head. The John Deere fired up. It roared alive. Its lights came on. It clanked into gear and came chugging and grunting like a giant pig down-draw toward Grunt Tuggs.

The pick and shovel went back to working faster than ever. They looked like two pairs now with their long shadows in the headlights, and in those lights I could see Grunt still blinking the glaze from his eyes, staring at that old black van that the dirt twisted and snaked off of like something alive — that van that no one had seen for five months, along with Uncle and Cherry and Ralph, and all of them together last seen alive by Grunt Tuggs himself. Grunt pushed his chest up off the ground, but still couldn't get the rest of his body moving before the John Deere had reached him. His legs lay dead as cordwood as the John Deere stopped and set the bottom teeth of its skip-loader against the dirt a foot from Grunt.

My throat was bulging up toward my mouth, like I was going to puke my heart out. Every square inch of me wanted out of that draw, but I had no more muscle to move than a shadow does. The grader grunted, bit down, chewed loose the plug of gravel Grunt lay on, and hoisted him, its jaw drooling pebbles that drizzed down like hungry spit. The handle of the van's rear door twitched downward once, then again, and again, and again — and popped the gritty doorcatch free. The door shoved open with a noise like broken teeth grinding.

Ralph stuck his muzzle out into the headlight beams. Those beams showed all the detail of him, the fur-clumps dangling from gluey black skin. You could see through the gaps in his snout to the honeycombed bone of him, see the maggots wrestling and crowding and twisting their little tails in there like thousands of tiny flames. Ralph jumped down from the van. His tail, all busy with worms, wagged a little, like he was pleased to see old Grunt. As the dog trotted to him, you could see his left shoulder had a big, frayed blast-hole blown out of it — splintered shoulder-bone showed like chalk in the moldy muscle. The John Deere lowered Grunt, like a waiter bowing. He was struggling his shotgun to his shoulder, but when the scoop banged down he rolled out, and as he came face up, Ralph set his huge paws on his chest, jawed him by the throat, and clamped

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his head down hard as iron to the gravel. That was when Uncle came out — and that was when I ran.

True enough, I looked before I ran. I saw him plain enough, or most of him — how *he* had a blast-hole in the left side of his chest and how the headlights made it look black as a moon crater in the crumbly white cheese of his skin. How he had a pipe wrench in one hand and a pair of bolt-cutters in the other, and how his lizard-skinned fingers had a grip on them like roots on earth. But it was his eyes I didn't want to see. We both knew I was there — I understood that — but I just didn't want to make a personal point of it, eye to eye. So I ran. I was still slick as a shadow. I was scared hollow, and light as air. I cut across that slope to the head of the draw as Grunt's bellowing started. I fired up my truck and gunned up the roadcut. Jouncing, flinging rollers high and wide, I rocketed through Uncle Tuggs's yard, made the highway and took off for help.

I thought I'd never reach it in time — not before my brainsprings started popping out of my ears — but at last I saw that light up ahead. I swung into the lot and jumped out. I ran in and got a twelve-pack and a pint of Jack Daniels.

Behind the wheel again, breathing a little easier, I took the freeway down to River Road, which I took out to the ocean. I drove slow, and worked on the twelve-pack, and thought about it all. It seemed pretty clear to me, when I added it all up, that Uncle just had no reason to have it in for *me*, especially when I'd helped him so much.

When I got to the coast, I turned south, and I dumped the firewood and the broken saw off of several cliffs along a ten-mile stretch of Highway 1. It was a good three hundred dollars worth of firewood. Somehow, after all I'd been put through, having to do that really pissed me off.

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In Ron Goulart's ("That Wonderful Summer," October 1985) latest, Ben Jolson is no longer a member of the Chameleon Corps but his shapechanging abilities are still in demand. And how about giving a "snerg" to a friend?

Ex-Chameleon

BY
RON GOULART

He was moderately surprised when the young woman walked in through the wall.

Surprised enough to drop the ceramic snerg he'd been in the process of wrapping to put into a shipping carton.

Lunging, Ben Jolson caught the foot-high statuette before it had the chance to smash on the floor of his small warehouse.

"Reflexes still darn good," observed the redhead, brushing dust from her two-piece sinsatin cazsuit. "And you're way past forty, Ben."

"Two years isn't, technically, way past, Molly." Jolson, eying the slim intruder, set the rescued snerg on his workbench. "My secsystem is guaranteed to be impervious to wallwalkers."

"Yep, which is why I'm so tickled by this new gadget." When Molly Briggs tapped her midsection, something under the sinsatin produced a metallic thunk. "Not only does it efficiently rearrange a person's atoms and allow for passing through solid matter, it futzes up any and all alarm systems. Cost $360,000 each, and more if you want silver knobs instead of the standard plaz ones on—"

"Close to half a million trubux so you can walk through my wall instead of the door." Jolson nodded across the carton-filled room toward the sudometal doubledoors.

"Heck, I'm just simply trying this out on you, Ben." Smiling, she brushed aside wrapping paper and excelsior to perch on his workbench. "We bought six of these for the Briggs Interplanetary Detective Service. Dad and I feel—"

"That reminds me of something I've been meaning to bring up," said the long, lean Jolson. "I know that,

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when I retired from the Chameleon Corps last year, I signed a—"

"You better sit down," the red-haired Molly advised. "What I have to say will stun and sadden—"

"How about letting me explain what I've been thinking about first? Then, if you've come to offer me another BIDS assign—"

"You know what I've been wondering lately, Ben? I'll tell you — since you can change and modify your shape, thanks to the processing and training of the Chameleon Corps Division of the Political Espionage Office right here on our planet Barnum, why don't you use that exceptional ability to improve your looks?"

"Improve them?" His left eye narrowed. "How'd you suggest I—"

"Oh, listen, you're an attractive man," Molly assured him, smiling. "And — did I ever tell you this before? — I had an awful crush on you back when I was a dippy teenager and Dad and you were both crackerjack Chameleon Corps agents, roaming the Barnum System and disguising yoursel—"

"You have told me about the crush on prior occasions, yes," the former Chameleon Corps agent informed her. "The first instance occurred just before I signed up to be a part-time operative for your detective agency." Picking up the ceramic snerg, he resumed wrapping it.

"All I was getting at, Ben, is that you'd look a heck of a lot handsomer with that gray gone from your temples and that dinky bald spot up at the back of your head patched up," Molly continued. "You might also want to do something with those tiny wrinkles under your eyes. Forgive me, if from the vantage point of my youth — I'm only twenty-five, after all — I tend to—"

"You're twenty-eight."

"I ought to know better than to lie about my age to an ace investigator like you. What are those ugly things, by the way?" She pointed at the row of pastel-tinted snergs lined up near her resting backside.

"Snergs. Little creatures indigenous to the planet Murdstone. Right now ceramic snergs are considered very collectible out there. I'm shipping ten dozen a week. Which is another reason I don't have time for taking on detective chores that—"

"Isn't that a coincidence? Because this dreadful, potentially heartrending news I'm bringing you has to do with that selfsame planet." She shifted, patting at the various flap pockets that fronted her cazsuit. Locating what she sought, Molly extracted a vial of grayish dust. "Prepare yourself for a shock, Ben."

He glanced at the vial she held out with thumb and finger, then finished wrapping the snerg. "I'm braced."

"This is Sam Paint," Molly announced, agitating the dust in the glaz tube. "All that's left of one of our best BIDS ops."

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Nodding, Jolson stuffed the statuette into its carton. "So?"

Wiping at the corner of her eye with the hand that held Paint's ashes, she said, "Instead of holding back, it might be best to let your true feeling out. I certainly won't think less of you for keening and sobbing."

Jolson boosted himself up onto the bench beside her. "Sam Paint was a schmuck," he said. "A showboat when he was with the Chameleon Corps and a second-rate operative since he joined your agency. Of the six ex-Chameleons you've got on the BIDS payroll, Sam was the biggest pain in the toke. The agency's better off without him. So's the whole Barnum System, for that matter."

"Oh." Molly lowered her head. "That sort of throws a spanner in the works, making the next part of my pitch sort of rough."

"You were intending to get me to haul out to Murdstone and clean up whatever mess Sam Paint was futzing with when he did something dumb enough to get himself killed."

She nodded, long red hair brushing at her shoulders. "It is an intriguing case, Ben, even if you don't care about avenging a fallen comrade," she said. "Although I was hoping the code of the private investigator would prompt you to—"

"Private investigators, maybe. But that's not the code of onetime Chameleon corps agents who've retired to run their own wholesale ceramics businesses and are growing increasingly uneasy about letting themselves be conned into taking nitwit assignments involving jaunts to the pestholes of—"

"Sorry you feel that way, because Dad and I both think this Murdstone assignment calls for an op who can change his shape and appearance as need be," Molly told him. "That was true when it looked like just a touchy cross-species adultery investigation in the upper echelons of the industrial elite out there. Now, with possibly more sinister implications showing up, we need a man who's a master at shapechanging. A normal, everyday operative is just likely to get slaughtered right off the—"

"Nope. I've decided that nine assignments for you is more than—"

"Guess you haven't as yet heard that the Barnum Supreme Court, in a joint session of both the Humanoid and Android Divisions, has made a unanimous ruling," she said, smiling. "Probably not, since it happened only seven minutes ago. Anyhow, the upshot is that—"

"Seven minutes ago? How the hell do you—"

"Oh, that's because Dad was somewhat instrumental in getting this pushed through. The point is, if you try to renege on your contract, you're liable to go to Devil's Island #26 — that's the sort of run-down one that orbits the second moon of Barafunda. They don't even, as I understand it,

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have running water in the cells and—"

"O.K., I'll take the assignment." Jolson swung down to the warehouse floor. "But when I get back, you and I and your dear father are going to have a lengthy chat about my future with BIDS."

"If you get back," said Molly with a forlorn smile.

Jolson, who was large and green now, undid the zipper of his neon-trimmed waistcoat and then patted the green knee of the dude ranch's social chairman. "Wellsir, little missy, I plumb forgot this here now city had so much to offer in the way of temptations of the flesh."

Smiling, the young woman politely removed his hand from her person.

Her skin was a smooth emerald green and she was humanoid, yellow-haired, and decked out in a spunglaz skirtsuit. Jolson, an exact replica of an aging multimillionaire lizardman playboy name of Pancho Burmah, was a muddy swamp-green and scaly. He seemed to weigh a good two hundred and fifty pounds, was clad in a checkered glotux and licorice-tinted ten-gallon glazhat.

The dude ranch was domed over with seethru glaz and covered three and a half acres of sandy country in the heart of FunZone-3 of the capital of the largest territory on the planet Murdstone. From the one-way vuwindows of Jolson's rancho-suite, you could see a stretch of desert, some roaming cattle, and a few prairie-snergs.

The green SC was saying, as she spread a dozen bright brochures on the floating coffee table, "How's this one strike you? You might enjoy, if you're in the mood for slumming especially, the Rent-A-Bimbo No-Frills Bordello over in SinZone-5 at—"

"Nope, child, I ain't in no dadgum mood to go on the cheap," he explained. "See, I got me a pretty fair spread back to home. The Tottering B Ranch, six thousand acres orbiting —"

"How about this, then? — Colonel Pander's Virgin-Style Sinpalace? Each girl guaranteed a—"

"Whoa now, sis," Jolson said, holding up a scaly paw. "That's one of them franchise operations, ain't it? Heck, a waddy can get that sort of stuff out in the sticks."

The young woman allowed a small, impatient sigh to escape her emerald lips. "Well, here we have something a bit more unusual — Computer Mama's Electronic Brothel."

Jolson took up the proffered literature. "Hot dang," he exclaimed after perusing it. "You mean to tell me none of these ladies of the night are real?"

"Exactly, Mr. Burmah." She pointed to a block of copy. "'You'll be astonished by these amazingly lifelike android replicas of the most beautiful and provocative ladies to be found any-

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where in our vast and infinite universe.' And so on. For those who prefer real females, there are some live ladies in the Massage Wing, but outside of—"

"Well, tarnation and thunderation, I do believe I'd like to try one of them andies," said Jolson, slapping his own knee. "I ain't never, in all my born days, dipped the old . . . that is, I ain't never dallied amorously with no machine."

"Shall I make you an appointment, then?" She rose from the floating lucite sofa they'd been sharing, scooping up her collection of brochures.

"Yessir, ma'am." Jolson stood, too, and gave her a cordial smack on the backside. "Tonight sometime, sooner the better."

"Any preferences as to type of simulacrum?"

"Nope, just tell 'em Pancho Burmah'll take potluck."

"I'll arrange an appointment and inform you of the hour." She let herself out.

Jolson, rubbing his leathery green hands together, settled again on the sofa. "Afraid for a while there she wasn't even going to suggest the damn place."

He was sitting in the oversize sunken tub, bellowing a prairie ditty and scrubbing his rough green back with a long-handled neosponge, when a tiny bell commenced ringing in his left earhole.

Hopping deftly from the tub, splashing considerable water, he grabbed a shaggy yellow towel and a stungun from the chair next to the big in-floor tub.

Towel wrapped round his wide lizard middle, gun in his right fist, Jolson eased over to the partially open bathroom door.

Snorting, he kept his gun in view and went tromping into the living room. "What in the hell are you doing on this particular planet?"

Molly Briggs set her plazpurz on the coffee table. "I'm your backup," the redhead explained, smiling tentatively. "Did you fail to retain that fact from the extensive briefing we provided in our BIDS offices on Barnum? Sorry if the—"

"You never said a damn thing about . . ." Suddenly he went dashing over to her. "Hush, don't say anything more."

"This isn't, if you don't mind my saying, the most friendly welcome I've—"

"Quiet. Silence." He grabbed her small brimless hat from her head, then plucked a tiny silver button from it. Dropping the button to the floor, he stomped on it until it was destroyed.

"Darn." Molly backed until she stumbled into a tin wing chair and sat. "Was that a bug?"

"Voxpix," he replied, not cordially. "Meaning whoever planted it on your half-wit unsuspecting person

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now knows I'm here and what I look like and that I'm working for you."

She folded her hands on her lap. "Heck."

Jolson, readjusting his towel, stepped over to his briefcase and yanked it open. He grabbed his small bugrod and went over his four-room suite again. No one had planted anything since his last sweep on arrival five hours earlier. Nor was Molly carrying anything more.

"Where were you before you barged in on me?"

She looked up at him. "You're awfully ugly, by the way."

"By humanoid standards. To lizardmen I'm quite something." He made an impatient c'mon-c'mon gesture with his big green hand. "Now tell me something, damn it."

"Well, gee, I landed at the spaceport just about two hours ago. I'm afraid spacelag still bothers me, especially when I travel one of these no-frills jumpers," she said, not quite meeting his eyes. "That could maybe explain how come I'm not as sharp as usual. I mean, usually I'm a darn good field operative."

"I know," he said, with a possible lack of conviction. "Where've you been between then and now?"

"Only over to our Briggs Interplanetary Detective Service Offices here in the capital," Molly replied. "And, Ben, the place's been ransacked. Whoever did the job went in with pretty sophisticated tossing gear. They entered our voxdisc files and most of the infoballs."

"You folks ought to spend more on secsystems, less on half-wit gadgets for—"

"Listen now, please." She stood, grabbed her purse, and took a wad of realpaper sheets out of it. "They didn't know about poor Sam's habit of making notes in longhand on old-fashioned paper."

"They missed finding those?"

"Exactly," she said. "See, Sam had this android secretary — Esme EP/LS-104 — poor kid."

"Hum?"

"Oh, they — those hoodlums who broke in — they used a disabler on poor loyal Esme. But they didn't know Sam'd had a special compartment built into Esme's . . . um . . . backside I guess you could call it. These notes were in there."

Taking a deep, slow breath, Jolson began to change. In just over a minute, he was himself again. After tightening the towel around his waist, he sat opposite Molly. "Let me see the—"

"Why aren't you Burmah anymore?"

"They know about that one."

"Oh, yes, I forgot. You know, Ben, I still can't think when they hung that bug on . . . oops, darn it. The meech lady."

"Sidewalk flower vendor?"

"Yep — and that should've struck me as odd," said Molly, shaking her head. "I mean, what was a sidewalk

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peddler doing up on the seventy-second floor of the Barson Building? I was, momentarily, dumb."

"She sold you that bouquet of purplish meech flowers stuck on your hat?"

"Afraid so."

"Before or after you found Sam Paint's notes?"

"After, actually, as I was coming out of the offices. So they don't know about them."

He leaned and took the papers from between her fingers. "Do they give us some notion of why Sam was killed at Computer Mama's?"

"They sure do. And, Ben, this looks like it's a heck of a lot more than a divorce case."

The initial assignment, as explained to Jolson during a brainstim briefing back on Barnum, had seemed relatively simple. Possibly dangerous, since Paint had met his death while working on the case, but not especially complicated. And it was probable that Paint's trip to Computer Mama's andy-staffed bordello wasn't tied in with the investigation. The late operative, as Jolson recalled him, wasn't above dropping in at a whorehouse for purely social reasons. It might've been just bad luck that he got himself electrocuted while coupling with an extremely lifelike, though defective, replica of an eighteen-year-old Venusian virgin. On the other hand, it might be a direct result of his BIDS assignment, which was why Jolson had assumed the appearance of a well-known playboy and was planning a visit to Computer Mama's.

Sam Paint had been hired by a Mrs. Nastasha Quarnaby two weeks earlier to confirm her suspicions that her husband was engaged in a cross-species affair. Yvan Quarnaby, a plump, fifty-six-year-old birdman, was president of PlazHartz Interplanetary. PI was the largest, and most successful, manufacturer of artificial hearts in the Barnum System of planets.

But, as hinted at in the handwritten notes made and stashed by Paint on the day he met his death, there was more to this case than a rich birdman dallying with a human lady. Trouble was, though, Paint didn't go into enough specifics in the three pages of scribbling Molly'd uncovered. "Confirms my suspicions," Paint had scrawled. "Subject not seeing (illegible) for sex alone. . . . This is big and the (illegible) is at stake. . . . Possibly make a buck on my own. . . . But must be damn sure he's actually (illegible) as I suspect. . . . Should get the info I need from Pauline (illegible) in the Massage wing at Computer Mama's. . . . Tidy sum for me keeping quiet. . . ." They, however, had apparently decided to assure Paint's silence another way.

He never got the massage.

Jolson, having changed himself in-

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to someone other than the lizard multimillionaire, had arrived at the glaz and neometal tower that housed Computer Mama's at a few minutes beyond nine on that rainswept evening.

"I fear, sir, that you have no appointment for the Massage Wing," the polite tin-plated robot behind the realwood desk in the oval reception room on Floor 13 told him.

Jolson rested his right hand, which seemed to be made of copper, on the edge of the desk. "Are youse trying ta tell Johnny Mechanix dat he ain't gonna get a massage in dis dump?"

"Oops," remarked the round-headed robot. "Would you be the Johnny Mechanix who controls organized crime on the planet of Peregrine and came by his name because as various parts of him got shot, blasted, and zapped away, he replaced them and became ever more of a cyborg, dedicated to destroying his enemies?"

"I wouldn't put it in dose pansy terms," growled Jolson as he scratched at his aluminum nose, "but I'm dat Johnny Mechanix, yeah."

"Well, we ought to be able to do something for you, sir . . . let's see now." The robot punched up something on the terminal at its desk. "Ah, yes, there's a vacancy with Elana in—"

"Nix on dat broad. I heard dat dis dame Pauline's da best?"

"Pauline Kasshoku-No?"

"She's da one I want to see."

"You understand that Pauline isn't an android — she's a human. Actually a very personable Japanese-Venusian young woman of—"

"Skip da crap. I wanna see her."

"She's with a client at the moment, but soon as—"

"Which crib's da skirt in?"

"Suite 3, but you—"

"Sez you."

Jolson went strolling around the desk. He pushed through an ivory door. He went striding down a thermocarpeted corridor.

When he located Suite 3, he whopped on the door with his metal fist. "Hey, Pauline, pull up your knickers and lemme in."

Nothing happened.

After fifteen seconds Jolson kicked open the door with his left foot, which appeared to be made of cast iron.

A naked apeman was floating up near the pebbled ceiling.

Pauline, a small dark-haired young woman wearing a yellow towel, was staring in Jolson's direction. "Sir," she managed to say finally, "my type of massage, involving as it does my considerable telek powers, isn't something that can be burst in on by rude louts who—"

"Youse." Jolson pointed a copper thumb at the floating apeman. "Get your glad rags on, den scram."

"Who do you think you are?" demanded the apeman.

"Me, I'm Johnny Mechanix. And

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you, if youse don't haul your toke out of here, you're gonna be diddly squat."

"Sorry I didn't recognize you right off, sir." apologized the apeman. "Pauline, honey, could you lower me?"

"It's going to futz up your auras, but O.K." she gestured and he lowered, gradually, to the floor.

A moment later and the apeman, clothes clutched to his hairy chest, was out and gone.

"You sure must be anxious for a massage," the young woman remarked. "Let me explain first, though, just how my form of telek massage is—"

"Actually," said Jolson as he nudged the partially ruined door shut, "I just came for a chat." From his pocket he took a truthdisc. Swinging out with his flesh hand, he slapped it against her throat. "You're under my control now, Miss Kasshoku-No, and you're obliged to answer my questions."

"Yes, you putz," she replied, eyes glazing.

"Little more respect, if you will."

"Yes, kind sir."

"Better. What happened to Sam Paint?"

"He died."

"How was that arranged?"

"They took care of him in the repair lab. Electrocuted him, made it look like an accident with one of the andies."

"And that fooled everybody — cops and all?"

"The cops never ask too many questions."

"Paint came here that night to see you. Why?"

"I was instructed to do that."

"By whom?"

"Dr. Lutz herself."

"Who's she?"

"You've never heard of Dr. Heather Lutz, the leading neurotronics expert on Murdstone? Silent partner in this whole Computer Mama setup?"

"Paint was expecting specific information about something. What'd you promise him?"

"I was instructed to contact him, tell him I knew something about the ex-Chameleon he was interested in."

Jolson frowned. "A former agent of the Chameleon Corps? Have we got another one involved in—"

"Attention, Pauline!" came a raspy voice out of the speaker mounted next to the door. "The man with you is not Johnny Mechanix. We've just talked to the real one via satcom. Hold that impostor."

"Ah, that's the trouble with improvising an identity." Jolson yanked a yellow sheet off the cot against the wall.

By the time he stepped into the hall, he was a pudgy, blue-faced human with curly silver hair. The sheet he wore like a robe. He assumed a beatific expression.

A half minute later two large android bouncers rounded the bend of the corridor. "Out of the way, bud," one advised.

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"Ah, brothers, tarry for a while," he invited the running mechanical men. "For I have come here to preach to all sinners who—"

"Geeze," said the other huge android, "we sure got a lot of nuthatches busting in here this evening."

"We'll come give you the heave-ho later, padre," promised the larger android as they ran by him. "Right now we got a date with a guy who ain't Johnny Mechanix."

"I am the right Reverend Leon Tikiti-Maji," Jolson called after them. "And you'd be wise to heed my words."

They ran on.

Jolson, still smiling beatifically, scooted out of there.

When Molly Briggs's nose gave another involuntary twitch, she rubbed the palm of her hand across the tip and remarked, "I don't see, Ben, why we couldn't have used the perfectly fine computer at our local BIDS Offices instead of coming down here to this hole in the bowels of SlumZone-4."

Jolson, himself again, was leaning against the wall of the small, soot-colored room and watching the ratman huddled over the somewhat unorthodox computer terminal on the center of the ashen carpet. "Because the opposition's got that place pegged," he answered.

"Simply because they managed to bug my hat doesn't mean we—"

"Ar, it's no doubt me the young lady doesn't care for," said the scruffy ratman. "I'm used to it, Ben, so you won't hurt my feelings if—"

"She's got nothing against you, Dr. IQ."

"Nice of you to try to soothe my feelings," said Dr. IQ, whiskers quivering. "But, let's face it, most people, and especially humanoids, don't like rats. You can tell them over and over that a rat and a ratperson aren't the same . . . but, alas, there is that unfortunate resemblance."

"And all this smelly cheese." Molly was sitting, arms folded, on a crippled sofa next to a row of shelves that held dozens of wedges of cheese.

"Ar, that's true enough, Miss Briggs," admitted IQ. "Rats, those little disgusting vermin, do show a fondness for cheese. But allow me to point out that many gourmets do as well. For instance, I was reading only the other evening in a book entitled *Eat Cheese to Win*, by a most respected author — not a ratman but a toadman, by the by — which stated—"

"Doc," interrupted Jolson, "I'm paying you to tap into some information sources. Forget defending your ethnic—"

"Right you are, Ben." The ratman adjusted his knit cap. "Oh, miss, feel free to help yourself to some Gruyère, schwarzenberger, Camembert, spitzkase, or pimento cheese. Myself, I'm particularly partial to Gorgonzola."

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"No, thanks all the same."

"Now, back to the clandestine gathering of data." After rubbing his paws together, Dr. IQ punched out something on his warped keyboard. "Ar, here we go, Ben. The only former Chameleon Corps agents living in the entire territory are Marianne Truscott, age fifty-one, Don Juan Thompson, age eighty-six, and Fergus MacWorthy, age forty-three."

Jolson considered the information for a moment. "I think we want a man," he said. "Probably a younger one. And from what I remember of MacWorthy, he wouldn't be above fooling with—"

"You know what I'm wondering?" asked Molly, unfolding her arms, rubbing at her nose, refolding her arms.

"O.K., Doc, now get me the stuff on Dr. Lutz's apartment, beach house, and, if possible, that orbiting sanitarium she operates. O.K.?"

"Piece of cheese, as they say. No trouble." He poked at keys.

"I'm wondering if maybe you aren't missing a bet," said Molly. "Suppose there's one ex-Chameleon you're overlooking?"

"Sam Paint, you mean?" He grinned. "Nope, that was Sam in the vial."

"How can you be cert—"

"I had those ashes analyzed before I left Barnum."

"How'd you get the—"

"Palmed it."

Molly made a disgruntled noise. "You shouldn't have done anything like that without first—"

"How about a pat of Brie on a Ritz cracker?" the ratman asked her over his shoulder.

"Pass."

"This isn't the runny kind. It's a new Brie, made of grout milk and—"

"Doc, to work." Jolson patted him on his overcoated shoulder.

"Ar, sorry. Here comes the stuff you want on the screen now." He tapped the sticky screen with a furry forefinger. "Yvan Quarnaby visited her on numerous occasions over the past nine weeks, at all her locations. And, five times, so did Fergus MacWorthy, according to the secsystem monitor records I've just successfully tapped."

"MacWorthy is looking more and more like the ex-Chameleon we want," said Jolson thoughtfully. "Doc, see if these visits of Quarnaby's match with his other comings and goings."

"Ar?"

"His comings and goings from his home and from PlazHartz."

"They ought to, ought they not?"

"Check."

"No problem. Easy as falling off a Gouda."

Molly stretched up out of her chair, nose wrinkling again. "What exactly do you suspect is going on, Ben?"

He shrugged. "Something worth killing people over."

"Ar, this is definitely odd," remarked the ratman, hunching closer to the screen. "The figures don't jibe,

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Ben. On the first two entries, anyway. See? The first couple visits to Dr. Lutz by Quarnaby — he was also established as being at his synthetic heart plant."

"Could be MacWorthy was trying the identity out before they got rid of the real Quarnaby and replaced him."

Molly blinked. "Ben, do you suspect that—"

"Everyone, if you will, reach for it." A portly blond human had walked, unexpectedly, through a sooty wall of Dr. IQ's apartment. In his fifties, wearing a two-piece tuxsuit, he carried a kilgun in his right hand and a stungun in his left. "Awfully glad I tailed you, Miss Briggs."

"Darn it," said Molly, scowling. "It's Lieutenant Warwork of the Territorial Police."

"Where's your warrant?" Jolson asked him. "You can't come walking through walls without—"

"One doesn't need a warrant for this sneaky sort of work, old man."

"Antirat persecution," muttered Dr. IQ.

"On the contrary," said the police officer. "You're merely an unfortunate bystander, Doc. Granted, you'll be eliminated along with the overly curious Miss Briggs and her ex-Chameleon employee, yet—"

"Good gravy!" Jolson's eyebrows climbed, his mouth dropped open, and he stared at the terminal screen. "This stuff coming in about Dr. Lutz is going to change everything, Warwork."

"Eh? What's the deuced . . . oof!"

The renegade policeman made the mistake of turning his attention toward the screen for a few unguarded seconds.

Jolson leaped, grabbed him, applied a full nelson. "Take a closer look," he suggested, running him forward until his skull smacked the terminal hard.

"Easy, easy," cautioned the ratman. "That's a delicate mechan—"

"Bill Molly for repairs." Jolson let go and the lieutenant dropped to the floor unconscious. After taking his weapons, Jolson rolled him onto his back and yanked his shirtfront open.

"Whatever are you doing?" inquired Molly.

"Notice the scar?"

"Yep, ugly zigzag in the region of the heart."

"Sort of scar a PlazHart implant makes." Jolson stood up and away from the sprawled man. "I did some research on the subject earlier in the evening."

"You could've used my facilities, Ben," Dr. IQ was gently nudging his terminal. "It's O.K., it's working."

"What's the fact that this rogue cop's got an imitation heart have to do with—"

"Explain my notion after I visit with Dr. Heather Lutz," Jolson said. "Can you find out her present location, Doc?"

"Sure," he answered. "But how's about a little snack first? All this ex-

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citement has given me an appetite. I can run out to the cheese shop and pick up—"

"Just the address."

Jolson was youthful and small, not more than twenty-seven and hardly taller than five foot four. He was human, sandy-haired, and wearing a one-piece medsuit. The moment the shuttle docked at the orbiting sanitarium, he pushed through the rest of the passengers and was first off.

He hurried to an elevator tube, jumped in, and was whooshed up to Level 3.

Panting convincingly, he sprinted over to the rubberoid reception counter and grabbed the birdwoman nurse by the lapels of her white nursuit. "Good Gjensidig! Am I in time?"

A feather fell free from the plump woman's head, went drifting down to the medical charts spread out before her."Beg pardon?"

"I'll never forgive myself if I'm too late!"

"Too late for what?"

After blinking twice at the nurse, Jolson stepped back from the counter and spread his arms wide. "Don't you recognize me? Dr. Floyd Christmas!"

She clicked her bright yellow beak, ruffled her pale green feathers. "You do look sort of familiar, Doctor. Can you give me a hint?"

"A hint! Don't you watch the vidwall? Don't you read *Galactic Time-Life*?" Taking three more backward steps, he flapped his arms. "Dr. Floyd Christmas! The wonder boy of neurotronics!"

"Oh, right . . . you installed that plastic brain in a gorilla last month on Barafunda. Though why exactly a gorilla needs a—"

"I hope I'm in time, by Gjensidig, to aid Dr. Lutz! Is Mr. Quarnaby still among the living, or has he sunk into—"

"Him? He's back there in her private suite smoking stogies and had nearly singed his feathers when I looked in," the nurse informed him. "Who's this Gjensidig you keep evoking?"

"Very fashionable deity on my home planet these days! Now, I'd best go prepare to operate on—"

"But there's nothing wrong with—"

"Heather wouldn't have summoned me if this weren't a crisis! Do you know what my hourly fee is?" He skirted the counter, trotted down a corridor. From studying a plan Dr. IQ had dredged up with his bootleg computer, Jolson knew exactly where Dr. Lutz's suite was located. "Gjensidig bless you!"

"Yes, but . . ."

Upon reaching the door he wanted, Jolson halted and extracted a listening device from a pocket of his medsuit. This he attached beside the buzzbutton.

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". . . most successful week yet," a voice Jolson recognized as that of Fergus MacWorthy, fellow ex-Chameleon, was saying.

"We can do much better, Fergie." The woman's voice was high and nasal.

"Listen, pet, we planted seventeen of those modified PlazHartz of yours this week. And that adds to our collection of controlled officials the Lord Mayor of Sunspa-3, the Second Vice President of the Hydroponic Farmers Bank, the quizmaster on *Toad for a Day*, the police commissioner of—"

"I know, I know. Yet when I first came up with the idea of for modifying the PlazHartz heart so it pumped a mind-control drug into the bloodstream and up to the brain, I envisioned controlling not only this pipsqueak planet, but the whole Barnum System."

"Remember, Heather, that it takes a heap of snergs to build a snerghatch. First I had to lure the real Quarnaby into your lair, then—"

"What the blazes does that mean? That business about snergs."

"Well, it's a folk saying. Don't feign obtuseness. The point of it is, patience is required to—"

"I've had it up to here with snergs. I don't like sneng sayings," Dr. Lutz informed MacWorthy. "I don't like this idiotic ceramic sneng you gifted me with on my last birthday."

The sound of a sneng statuette shattering on a plaztile floor caused Jolson to wince slightly.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and entered the parlor. "The jig's up, folks," he explained, showing them his two stunguns.

"What's that saying mean?" asked the gaunt Dr. Lutz from her glazchair.

MacWorthy was wearing his own identity, that of a husky freckled man. "A jig is a sort of a dance, pet. This fellow, who I assume is Ben Jolson, an old colleague of mine, is explaining that the dance is over. The game's finished and we've lost."

"In a sneng's valise," said the doctor. "He's in the heart of my domain. I've got scores of nasty hoodlums, thugs, and gunsels on my payroll, and they'll soon—"

"Afraid not," Jolson said, grinning a boyish Dr. Christmas grin. "The law — that'd be the Interplan Law Service and not the somewhat corrupt local law — are on their way here."

"They can prove absolutely noth—"

"I've been broadcasting the conversation of you two out to them," he said.

MacWorthy sighed. "The balloon has landed."

"Will you, Fergie, quit making those inane—"

"I'd like you both to sit quietly until the authorities arrive." Jolson mounted a tin stool, keeping them both covered.

MacWorthy watched him for a few silent seconds. "Aren't you going to deliver a lecture to me, Ben?" he in-

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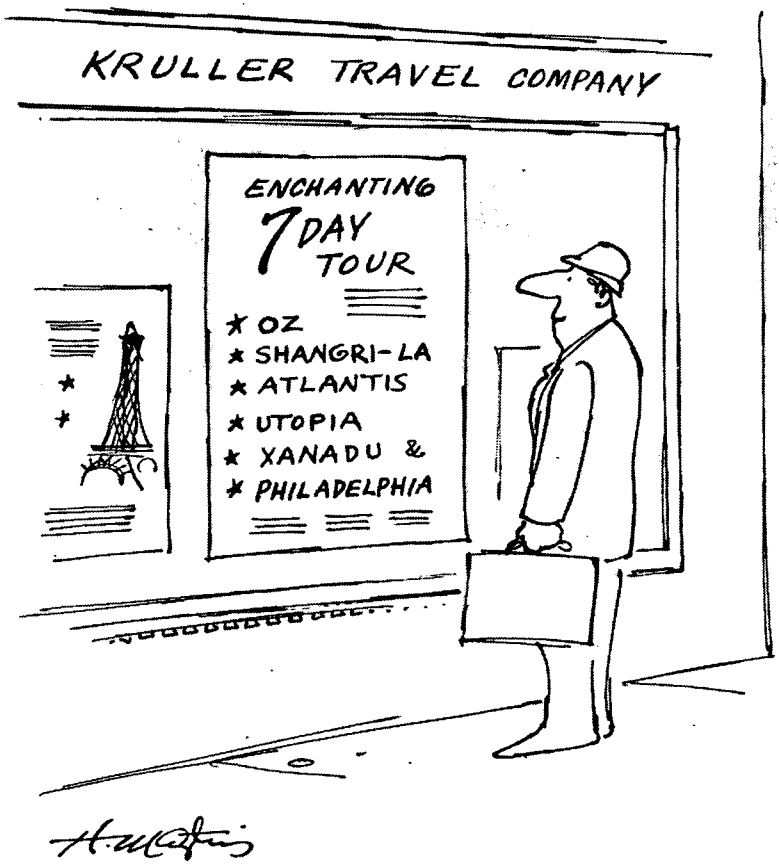
quired. "You know, tell me about the strict moral and ethical code of the Chameleon Corps and how I've violated it?"

"Hell," said Jolson, shrugging, "we've all done that."



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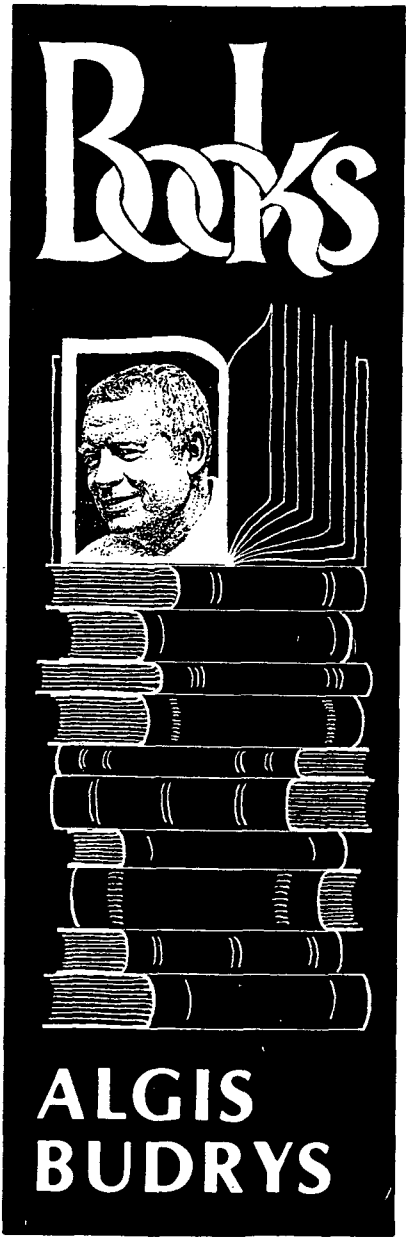

The Face That Must Die, Ramsey Campbell, Tor, $3.95

Angels of September, Andrew M. Greeley, Warner/Bernard Geis, $17.95

with remarks on several other works

Last time, we were discussing the horror-fiction phenomenon, its peculiarities. The most striking things about horror fiction are, first, that it's transgeneric, and second, that horror novels tend to be technically inept by customary standards.

This "ineptitude" may in fact be an artistic response; Stephen King, Peter Straub, and the other bellwethers of the field may be instinctively reacting by some Jungian imperative under which such intellections as plot, consistent characterization, and even internal logic, are swept aside by the juggernaut archetypal processes going on underneath. Maybe not. But it's noteworthy that the horror short story is almost always a tidily wrapped little one-punch package, and while that's no farther along technically than O. Henry brought us, it does proclaim an acute awareness of the uses of plot.

Nor are these practitioners primitives. Straub is usually cited as the (renegade) literateur of the bunch, but King is even more talented in the academic sense, and is just as formally disciplined when the occasion demands. It seems hardly likely either they or most of the other top people are writing "badly" through ignor-

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ance. Thus it's likelier that they are in fact working within different parameters from those we're accustomed to in SF, or even from those they use when they're not being horror writers.

But that's far from a fully thought-through conclusion; as yet, it's no more than an interesting proposition. The entire topic is hard to grasp, in part because it does exist across genres. *Cujo, The Shining, Christine,* and *Firestarter* fall into four different literatures if one disregards the horror component in these four King novels, at least one of which is descriptive fiction with no speculative content at all; meanwhile, Straub's *Floating Dragon* coincides a contemporary science fiction concept with a venerable gothic fantasy idea.

And what then of English writer Ramsey Campbell's *The Face That Must Die?*

Ramsey Campbell is the horror-writer's horror writer. The institutionalized forces of the horror-fantasy establishment are solidly behind him with awards and award nominations. His peers think quite well of him too — his name comes up incessantly when horror-practitioners talk shop somewhat as SF writers do when they talk about Gene Wolfe. Neither by-line is at the very top of the public's consciousness in its field; to that eye, Campbell is situated with respect to King or Straub as Wolfe is to Heinlein, Clarke or Asimov. But while some stefnists may revere the latter three writers, and may bow to their sales figures, who they study for aptitude is another matter.

Among mass-market editors attempting to create not so much a horror genre as a horror space on the shelves, Campbell is *the* hot rack-size property to vie for . . . inasmuch as King and Straub play in a different ballpark, selling-wise. And it was David Hartwell, the highly respected consultant to Tor, who on a recent convention panel spoke most glowingly of *The Face That Must Die,* as a marvelous example of horror-writing.

Well, then, nothing for it but to read it, eh?

It is a very well written but not a marvelously well written slasher story, akin to such predecessors as *Psycho,* or "Fear," told in large part from inside the slasher's logical but not rigorous and certainly insane viewpoint.

A young London couple, Cathy and Peter, are having a rough go of their marriage. Cathy is a cheerful creative type who also enjoys housework and putting her husband through school. Peter is a sullen social climber who treats her with alternating indifference and disdain. Through a series of coincidences, they attract the attention of a homicidal maniac, and the bulk of the wordage is devoted to moving the three of them into closer and closer juxtaposition. Finally there is a denoument,

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though not necessarily an ending, and we close.

It is evident — as it is not always indubitably evident in a King or Straub novel . . . that the closing chapter is exactly where the author has been going all along, and that he was in full control of every word it contains. It's in those words that it departs a little, a very little, from long-established modes that were never thought of as "horror."

Just as *Cujo* was essentially a John D. MacDonald novel with some extra stops pulled out, *The Face That Must Die* has absolutely no occult component of any sort and is essentially indistinguishable from the general run of "psychological suspense thrillers." Written with a mannered competence I'd put exactly on a par with D. G. Compton's, thematically it's a quite standard Cathy-and-Peter story, making full use of true-confession cliches. In a novel by Compton, the pressures on the marriage would be intensified by some SF detail — Peter would be marketing some dubious machine, and party of the third part would be his oleaginously plausible boss. In this book, it's a chap with Dad's razor in his pocket, but that's hardly a conclusive difference. The only plainly visible thing that makes it "horror" as distinct from horrifying is the byline.

Other features of the Tor edition are far more like it. They include a novelette, "I Am It And It Is I," which is another slash yarn but told exclusively from the drugged-out viewpoint of its protagonist. In this sense at least there is a mutation of reality, and thus a close approach to criteria cited by some attempted definitions of a horror genre.

There is also a Robert Bloch introduction, which ratifies a point made above — Bloch likens Campbell to the young Graham Greene.* He also recalls another from the last time — Bloch touches on his and Campbell's youthful affinity for H. P. Lovecraft, who does seem to have been the latest father of all this, Poe and Hawthorne being rather too various to be confined in that role, Fitz-James O'Brien and similar lads being a bit too obscure.

Finally, there is an autobiographical sketch — an admirably frank one, consequently of considerable scholarly value — in which Campbell describes for us his childhood and young manhood, which appear to have been about as hellish as one can imagine enduring this side of the booby hatch. It is a generally accepted proposition that the way to get a genius is to take a child, lie to it cruelly, and otherwise force it to see the world is re-

**Fair enough. The young Graham Greene in fact wrote a remarkably tedious style whose nature emerged, I think, from the young Graham Greene's self-conscious wrestlings with questions of religion. As he got older, Greene began turning out work in the manner which now tones all our recollections of him.*

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plete with crucial error. Perhaps. But if one were compiling evidence to support that view, here's a bunch.

The thing is, *is* it evidence? What about all the people who simply get beaten down into sullen grayness? What about the fact that everybody's childhood has a pretty strong component of (doubtless well-intended) exposure to cruelty, hypocrisy and various neurotic behaviors on the part of the loved ones? It's a plausible generality, of which the world has plenty, but it's either insufficient or off the point; not enough of us are geniuses to substantiate it in its simple form.

What might be substantiated is a proposition that this is a way to generate someone interested in horror fiction. If so, it would tend to explain the irrational structure of that fiction, since by definition it would be the fiction of menace generated by the loved one.

It would be a fiction whose resonances would freight the most fear precisely into those surroundings and individuals that would normally be considered the most safe. It would put the boogies under the bed and in one's own room closet. It would be, I think, the fiction of the wicked uncle and aunt, the stainless mother and the father absented by noble errands. It would be a fiction defined far more by effect and style than by philosophy; it would be like that other transgeneric, the "suspense" fiction that works like *The Face That Must Die* are preempting. It is, I suppose, particularly the fiction of those born not only after Hiroshima but after a World War II that in general brought down so many bright illusions . . . and the more disillusions the world imposes, and the nearer the cracking of the sky above and the earth below, the more intensely does it become one of the major fictions of our time.

What we are talking about is the sort of thing that concerns religions. And the more they are like the Western religions — that is, religions sprung from the Mediterranean region — the more involved they seem to be with the phenomenology of horror. It has been pointed out that a notably high percentage of horror writing comes from people with churching backgrounds. I don't know what that might mean. It does bring us to Father Andrew Greeley, now the author of *Angels of September* by Andrew M. Greeley.

Andrew Greeley is a priest in Chicago, where he has long been a thorn in the side of just about everybody. A newspaper columnist and a member of the Chicago city council until the archbishop — some say the Pope — told him to quit that, Greeley very much has his own ideas about a lot of things. He's also very smart, and various attempts to really put the blocks to him have failed in the face of his

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grasp of common and canon law, his readiness with a honed word, and his footwork. I have to tell you I kind of like the guy's presence, not that it's directly to the point in this discussion.*

Angels of September is written to be a best-seller, like a number of previous Greeley books. Part of that is a thorough larding-in of gossip and innuendo about Church personalities and politics in the days when Chicago was firmly Irish. For our purposes, this is not quite filigree — it serves to background the time, still only a generation back, when, according to Greeley's picture, the Church was run by stupid, short-sighted, cloistered individuals who [A] hated women, [B] thought only in terms of power, and [C] left the education of Catholic children to an establishment of narrow-minded, bewildered and frightened nuns and embittered priests who had been shunted out of the main line of progression in the hierarchy.

Greeley's now-generation hierarchy, after the Vatican councils and the Ecumenical movement, is topped by hip, not to say nearly finger-popping, lads. (They're still male, of course, but on that point I'm sure they do tend to question the reactionary Pole in the Vatican.) But sadly for Anne Reilly, a gorgeous art-gallery owner, one-time senatorial mistress and ticking sex-bomb, the reforms are meaningless. She's in her fifties, and ridden with the guilt implanted in her by the old school. Layered over that is her freakish relationship with a now long-dead mad priest who was also an artist, and her will I-won't I lifelong blazing but unconsummated attraction to Mike Casey, once her schoolmate, now a deputy superintendent of police.

Not even her female Jungian analyst can get her to loosen up and just take the fruits that life still offers her so bountifully. That is because Anne also has a dreadful secret — in addition to the dreadful secrets involved with the purulent priest and the drunken wife-beating society-boy husband of her since-annulled marriage. And while she has a loving and bountiful handsome son, she also has a real maggot of a daughter who pesters her whenever visions, explosions, hauntings, burnings, and demonic strippings and rapings aren't taking up her time. To nobody can she confess her central guilt, and so she writhes . . . Oh, how she writhes! . . . until we begin to approach the end of the book and Greeley throws us not one but several explanations in the midst of a series of happy climactic events.

O.K. What I have done with the

**If you're not a Roman Catholic and/or haven't had much contact with the Church as distinguished from the religion, you will, however, be amazed at what scenes an Irish-American priest can describe in prose and escape being struck down on the spot. Bing Crosby he's not, nor Barry Fitzgerald.*

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above synopsis is show why I think there's not a farthing's worth of difference between this plot and a Harlequin Romance scenario, decorations and language aside. This is a plot almost as elementary as Campbell's, and nearly as ramshackle as the one Straub and King used for *The Talisman*. And there are other questionable peculiarities — all sorts of petty error, including attributing the role of the lawman in *High Noon* to Jimmy Stewart, to using "microchip" for "microfiche," to ignorance of how to modulate the past tense, to switches of tense in the middles of paragraphs, to one of my favorite mislocutions — "teeth-grinding" — juxtaposed not with "bones-shattering", but with "bone-shattering." Greeley will not be leaving feetprints in the sands of syntax.

But that's as may be. Despite the claptrap and clutter, *Angels of September* is actually a rather well-told tale as long as it doesn't have to justify its horrific events, and that spavined latter section fortunately is swiftly over. Meantime, it has a great deal to say not only about guilt and the Church as distinguished from the religion, but also indirectly about novels in which unexplained fire and brimstone gout out at the innocent, the devils in a Boschean painting draw daily closer to capturing the nude maiden, and events come to a head with breast-ripping, flaming multiple rapine that leaves its victim fully clad and unscorched, the sucking-out of heat from the living, and a lightning storm contrary to all meteorological knowledge.

What has happened here, I think, is that Greeley, who is far from an unconscious or instinctive writer, has done some heavy thinking about horror-writing, and found a way to fit it into his own thinking about Catholicism as well as his experience growing up in Chicago. So some of the time he is consciously commenting on these matters as well as making a buck so that he can go on doing it. And some of the time — because he is but a man, and thus both conscious of the archetype and manipulated by his helpless reactions to it — he is proceeding despite the commentator, markedly educated though that commentator is.

It's an amazingly layered book whose existence itself is but the core of a layered event in Greeley's life; there's material here for a score of sorts of analysis. And for those of you who have been following these past two columns with some interest, it's indubitably a must-have book.

Segue to endnotes:

Mike Resnick's *Adventures* (Signet, $2.95) is an excellent spoof of pulp adventure writing. It has a white goddess, an English jungle lord, gunrunning, dope-smuggling, and a faithful elephant. Not even by courtesy is

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it SF, but I don't care. Resnick should loosen up like this more often.

William A. Barron, Jr., of Honolulu, was the most effective of the many people who asked me to look at Barry Hughart's *Bridge of Birds* (Del Rey rack-size paperback, and now co-winner of the Howard award for best fantasy novel of 1984.) I thank you all.

Craig W. Anderson's *Science Fiction Films of The Seventies*($15.95, trade paper, from McFarland & Company, Inc., Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640) is not an exhaustive survey. However, it thoroughly covers every SF (that's Speculative Fiction, son) film Anderson felt was worth talking about, and there are a parcel of them.

Shortly before she fell gravely ill, Judy-Lynn del Rey informed me that the *Barnaby* books will in fact be going on much longer than I led you to believe in my review of Barnaby #1, a Del Rey rack-size paperback.

The next task to which I turn my hand is writing the introduction to the collected *Proceedings of The Institute For Twenty-First Century Studies.* You may start lining up now at the door of Advent:Publishers, Box A3228, Chicago, IL 60690. If you doubt me, ask anyone who has ever heard of Brigadier General Theodore R. Cogswell, U. S. Army Podiatric Corps, (Ret.), and/or Vicar General of the Order of Saint Asimov the Mute. It is a pity that Advent's format will not permit facsimile reproduction of the spottily-produced, insanely laid-out bulletins in which the Chinchilla (Pennsylvania) Eremite induced nearly all of the SF giants of the '50s, plus some rather large outsiders, to cavort with their minds unzipped. But the words will do. Oh, yes.

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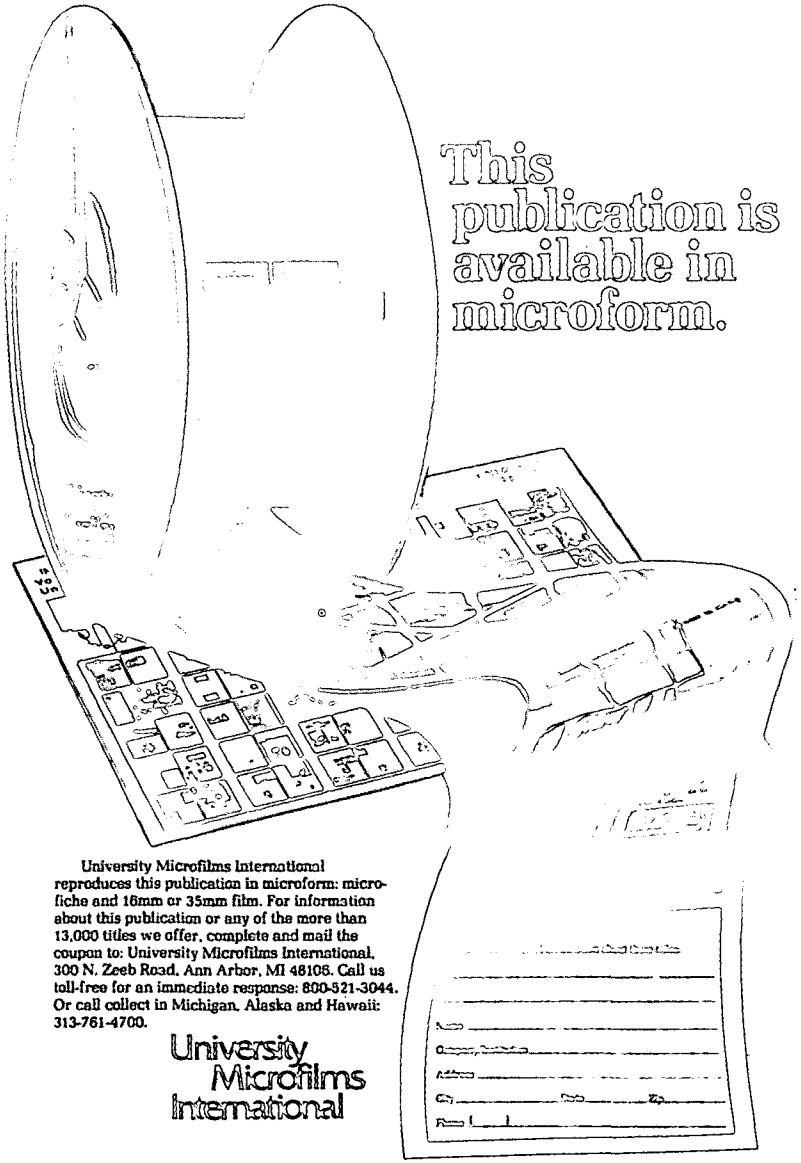

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Mr. Gotschalk offers an evocative and moving story about a pair of scouts mapping a New York City that is so far-future it is barely human . . .

Reconn Man in the City

BY
FELIX C. GOTSCHALK

In Old York Megalop, as throughout most of the planet Earth, photosynthesis and nitrogen cyclicity had triumphed over pollution, and the earth once again wept pure tears and exhaled clean vapors. It had taken about three hundred years, but now the Hudson and East rivers were pure and sparkling; a baobab tree grew in Times Square; Central Park was a lush rain forest; and the World Trade Towers were marvelously encased, networked, even connected, with kudzu up to the fortieth story. The skyline stood etched in incredibly clear stereoscopic clarity against the depthless blue sky as the sun boomed up in fiery brilliance. The silence that lay over the city was cottony in its insulation, and yet germinative, pregnant, humid, expectant, prehistoric. Then, from the topmost layer of a camphor grove in Central Park, came the grating scream of a macaw, and half a million starlings came awake and lifted from their perches, filling the air with a macrocosmic fluttering that beat a muted message across the luxuriant jungle park. At the base of the ivy-covered statue by the Rockefeller Center ice-skating rink, a lioness stirred, and a deep-timbre growl rattled in her throat. Beneath the rich earthen carpet on which she lay was a maze of ancient freon tubes in the floor of the skating rink, and beneath that, subterranean tunnels, ducts, shafts, caverns, subways and conduits, all burgeoning with fungi, lichens, and white moss. The stone and metal city was cocooned in foliage and filled with animals and birds.

Late in that summer day, the thunderheads boiled up in the west, and silent blooms of lightning filled the clouds, like incandescent lamps in

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fog. Darrell XIV stirred, awoke, and saw that a kudzu tendril had encircled his ankle during the twelve hours he had been asleep. "Teddy H. Kennedy on a Styrofoam crutch." He muttered his favorite ancient epithet and sat up on the gelatinous chaise. Outside the open window of his squatter's-rights billet (on the fourteenth floor of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel), his antigrav flitter hung in its stasis field, the delta-stab fuselage veined over with small, fresh, moving kudzu feelers. Darrell was a nomad cartographer, a cloned humanoid, 87 percent bionic, and programmed for reconnaisance and historicity functions. The Duchys of the Four Quads of the Old United States each had their own reconn-history people, and an implicit function of all of them was to develop bases for cooperative sociologic networking. However, territoriality continued to run instinctively deep, even in bionic organisms, and the pattern for at least the past two centuries had been one of inbred territories. Consequently, the few thousand Islamics in the far California Quad wanted nothing to do with the strident black chieftains of the Southeast Quad, the silent manufacturing robots of the Midwest, or the elite-bionic Nordics of the Northeast.

Darrell examined himself in the mirror: compact mesomorphic body, gently bulging topographic implants on his torso, two bright multifaceted visual agates, overly splayed olfactory slits, petal-like lip lines, and a full set of dentures, stronger than those of many of the carnivorous animals with which he shared the largely abandoned city. In physiognomy, he looked like a strong-jawed Elton John mannequin. The women tended to look like Bo Derek Hefner. Darrell capsulized his chaise, tucked it into his thoracic niche, walked across the damp, ancient persian rug to the window, and slid into the flitter. "Another day, another packet of protein dregs," he sighed as the flitter came active, lifting off and away from the foliaged walls. A funnel cloud of striped mosquitoes sang its frenzied song nearby, as he coded in the flight pattern, a crosshatched coverage flight that would add to the cartography holograms he had been recording for the past week. Like aerial sonar, the lasers on the flitter beamed down and charted the depths and declivities, the redoubts and the spires, the deep canyons of Wall Street, all the mottled green rooftops, the towers and the antennas, the skylights and elevator housings, the copter pods and flagpoles; and the cameras whirred and clacked out their high-resolution photo-holo cubes. Sound patterns were also recorded. The audile sensors could code in and separate the hiss of a monitor lizard from the crash of a rusted girder. Darrell was at low altitude, above a softly crumbling tenement area, when HUMANOID PRESENCE flashed on a control

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panel. Looking starboard, down over the trailing edge of the silver wing, and ellipsing his visual agates to ten-power mag, Darrell saw a Cheryl Ladd figure waving at him from a rooftop deck. He belayed the reconn matrix and dipped down to skim over the ancient Puerto Rican ghetto buildings. The girl's flitter was tethered to a chimney stack, and she was brushing her fine golden hair with a glowing wand. He read the RECEPTIVITY aura she projected, tethered his flitter, and went to her.

"Barbara IX," the girl said. Darrell gave his name, and they embraced ventral-ventral. Their genital areas touched, adhered, tightlocked, and they exchanged centile 87 orgasms, a routine initiatory heterosexual salute.

"That was heavenly," the girl sighed, brushing her aminoplast lips past Darrell's nasal ports, cuing in her DNA scent. "So quick, so biting, so poignant. Thank you."

"And my gratitude to you, beautiful one," he said. "Are you from the Albany Center?"

"Yes. I'm new on the route, fresh out of rookie school." She touched Darrell's Senior Level epaulets in a nice body-language sweep of playful deference. "Shall we shelter together? The storm's fast coming." The bulbous thunderheads towered high above the rooftop, like a canyon wall studded with undulating mammalian globes, and the thunder now seemed to boom in from all around them. Everything darkened, and the rain began to fall, heavily and yet silently, as if the large, rainbow-hued drops were of some soft yet heavy substance. Darrell got his environdial kit from the flitter and quickly materialized a small dome over them. He coded in plush epithelial carpeting, a dual chaise, medial luminescence. a Mozart flute sonata, and two vials of Metaxa.

"Ethel H. Kennedy and her dozen brats," the girl said. "Me drinking Metaxa is a little like a robot drinking corrosives." And she drank the fierce anisette brandy down. Darrell drank, and felt the bouquet fill his sinus caverns and nudge at the back of his eyecubes. "Liquid fire," he said, "keeps the throat seared clean." The reconn man and the reconn girl lay beside each other on the chaise, countercoded erogenous zones, and activated a thirty-minute, centile 94 orgasmic regimen. They lay back and exchanged samplings of life-script as the program built up slowly, broadening, deepening, differentiating. The Mozart sonata had no climactic finale, but its serenity served to reinforce the parasympathetic clarity of the bonded, pyrolated orgasm that welded the two young people together for 38.27 seconds of paroxysmal staging, cresting, contracting, and firing. Their shared moments of expulsive-ingestive joy coincided with lightning knocking a stone gargoyle from the pediment of St. Patrick's

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Church, but neither knew of this, safe and interlocked in the private life-space of the small dome.

"When you come to the end of a perfect day—" Darrell began to sing, facetious, noncontextual, free-floating in the afterglow, and then he sat up, alert, intent, on guard, his territorial sensors reading THREAT. Outside, on the steaming, hot-washed, softly collapsed roof, a mutant gladiator clone stalked and circled the dome. The figure was cruelly muscled, turnip-headed, ham-handed, with a strong musk scent of threat emanating from him, his axillary ports like wet chancres. He prodded the dome with his steel truncheon, like a child teasing an animal, then sniffed at it, jumping back, primevally fearful, but holistically destructive.

"A rover glad," Darrell whispered to Barbara, opting for penetrative vision and olfacting the scent. "Do you have a phaser on you?" The girl looked dismayed. "It's in the flitter, in a rack."

"We'll both get demerits," Darrell said, "I left mine in the rack, too."

"How could a *senior* reconn man do a dumb thing like that?" Barbara suddenly sounded cold and angry, her kittenish warmth gone. "You live with your phaser. It's supposed to be part of your hip." Darrell was angered by the girl's taunting voice, but he knew where to cathect his efforts.

"You want to bitch or you want to save your ass?" His voice came through at a quiet command level, and the girl responded with military resignation, fired by survival dynamics. "Listen now, you peel naked and pulse your umbilical zircon at him. I'll need about five seconds to get my phaser. My guess is he won't know what to do for at least thirty. Then he'll want to stalk you and sniff at you. Are you up to it?"

"No options," Barbara said. "Just don't let him touch me. Gun him down quick." Darrell visuoed through the dome and saw the glad hunkered down, sniffing at the fine geodesic mesh of the structure, his nostrils flaring rhythmically, like the radial undulations of a lamprey's mouth.

"Get behind the chaise," Darrell said. "That'll be a barrier to him if he rushes. Ready?" Barbara tensed and nodded. Darrell had the immediate problem in the forefront of his mind, but he also was wondering how he would deal with the consequences of having left his phaser in the flit. It was as bad as a duelist showing up on a foggy-dawn park lawn without the brace of flintlock pistols. He dematerialized the dome in one soft pop, bellowed a roar at the glad, and sprinted for the flitter, the crust of the tar roof yielding and weak beneath his light levitational boots. The glad reacted in a flash, scuttled to intercept him, and then stopped, set his feet, and drew his truncheon back for a carefully leveraged throw. As he raised his long, hairy arm. Barbara screamed at him, invoking a startled re-

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sponse. Distracted now from Darrell, the glad watched as Barbara's belly zircon glowed and pulsed like the energy-eye of a furnace. The gladiator lowered the truncheon and drank in the rare sight: a centile 92 bio-human female in a posture of sexual receptivity. The girl's scent flooded his olfactory centers, sent itching hormonal messages to his pelvic cradle, and his serrated penile shaft began to emerge like the head of a Galápagos turtle. His breathing came in airy grunts, and as he began to lurch toward her, Darrell stunned him to the roof with his phaser. The glad stiffened in the force-cone and fell, as if struck a hard blow from above. The microcephalic head broke through the tar crust of the roof like a bowling ball on soft ice. Now Darrell and Barbara became aware of the profound silence, the gentle wet wind, the humid sweetness of the air, and the distant chorus of birdcalls. Barbara averted her head and fluxed on her clothing sheath as Darrell notched the phaser to SEAR and incinerated the body. The roof caught fire, and the body lowered out of sight, the blackened rib cage looking like iron buttresses in the roof of some massive industrial building. Darrell got the feeling that the skeletal structure was indeed made of steel.

"The city is by definition ugly," Darrell said to Barbara as they flew in tandem toward the databank reporting station atop the Empire State Building. "Ugly in the sense of that most ancient relationship, prey and predator."

"The giant spider eats the bird-wing butterfly," Barbara sighed. "Yet the horned caterpillar looks formidable on the citrus leaf."

"And the chrysalis still hides from us the mystery of metamorphosis."

"And who preys on us, my stalwart bionic peer?" Barbara now sounded cheerful and supportive.

"The glads try to," Darrell laughed, relieved by the tone in Barbara's voice. He knew that their both forgetting to wear their phasers required mutual reporting, and was feeling his way for some alternative. Reconn personnel had been wiped and reprogrammed for lesser offenses. They lapsed into silence as they flew low over eucalyptus-choked Park Avenue. As the tandem flitters arced up toward the peak of the Empire State, other flitters appeared, in varying flight patterns, each carrying their cartographic samples of the ancient crumbling city. Darrell turned to Barbara, asking the question on both their minds: "I don't want to turn you in over the phaser thing. You gonna turn me in?" Barbara's face was at first affectedly stern, her eyes penetratingly severe, and then her expression softened and she kissed him quickly, impulsively. "No, no," she said, as if her spoken words were insects to be batted away from her sweet-sweated brow, "My responses are flexible yet. I couldn't report

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you." Darrell relaxed and gunned the flit into a recovery niche atop the eighty-sixth-floor parapet. "Thank Teddy H. Kennedy for the 13 percent of our bodies that is still humanoid," he laughed, but it was a strained laugh. "We're 87 percent bionic, and 13 percent — ah — what should we call that part of us? That remaining percentage?"

"Kindliness," Barbara said quietly. "We can still be kind to each other."

"Funny how nobody uses that word anymore," Darrell said. "Maybe to be kind is evolutionarily maladaptive."

"Well, it *feels* good to me," Barbara said, stepping out onto the smooth stone observation deck where millions of people had stood to look out over the spire-studded narrow rock island that was Old York. The deck began to fill with the other reconn people, and a provost sled arrived, its two slate-gray robots debarking like frogmen from a raft.

"Yeah, *kindliness*," Darrell said, letting the word filter through his humanoid soul. "I like the way it feels, too."

As the great spherical sun set in the rain-washed western sky, the senior reconn man and the plebe reconn girl took their places in the gathering line, feeling, for the moment at least, adaptively kind and at ease. They slotted their sample cases into the computer breach, and turned to walk toward the flitters. They were about to join hands when the provobots phaser-stunned them to the hard

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stone surface. Nobody paid much attention to the scene. It happened almost every day. The robots carried Darrell and Barbara as if they were light as feathers, placing them in coffinlike structures on the airsled.

"Another brace of 87-percenters," one of the robots muttered as the sled lifted off. "When will they ever learn that they are always on camera, always monitored, always taped?"

"What did they do?" the other robot asked, looking through the coffin surfaces at their serene faces.

"Forgot to carry phasers, came near getting killed by a glad, and then agreed not to report it."

"Ronald H. Reagan!" The robot gave his favorite ancient epithet. "That's a dangerous 13 percent to leave hanging for volitional acts."

"Two weeks at the implant farm and they'll be 94-percenters. No problem."

"What's that they said on the audios — *kindliness*, was it?"

"Lyndon H. Johnson!" The robot muttered the strongest ancient epithet of all. "I be dog if I know what that means."

The other robot made allowance for the old Faulknerian saying, and his linguistic banks clacked onto nonverbal. The sled flew into the gloriously primeval sunset, with the two as yet imperfect bio-humans peacefully unconscious in their crypts. Somehow, their faces looked kind.

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Kim Stanley Robinson will have a short fiction collection published this spring by Tor Books. Here, he presents us with a Conradesque tale of a man who, for a time, experiences a different point of view . . .

A Transect

BY

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON

After he had secured a window seat in the Amtrak coach, he set his dark brown leather briefcase in his lap and unlocked it. *Clunk. Clunk.* He liked the way the gold-plated hasps snapped open. About fifty times more power in the springs than was necessary. Sign of a well-tooled briefcase: big, heavy, powerful. Expensive. Something for clients to note with approval. Part of their confidence in him.

Riffling through his account files was depressing. Nothing in there but bad news. No one was buying fine paper in quantity these days; he had to bust a gut just to stay even. Northeast Section Marketing and Sales Vice President, forever and ever amen. He sighed; at times like this he felt utterly stuck. No chance of advancement whatsoever. Stuck at forty-five thousand a year for good, and with wife and kids throwing it away faster than he could make it. Lucky his credit was good, he could spend his future right up to his death and beyond, no doubt. Ah, the end of a long, hard trip: he needed a drink.

The train came out of its hole and he looked into the industrial yards of Montreal. Beyond them was the city center where he had spent the day selling. Sun setting behind it. Funny how much Canada looked like the States (he always thought that). He let his files accordion back into the briefcase and pulled out his copy of the day's *Wall Street Journal*. Up and down the train car, other copies of the same paper were blooming over the plush maroon seats, covering the businessmen behind them. A young punk wearing earphones sat in the aisle seat beside him, cramping his reading. Faint whispers of percussive

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music joined the rustling of newspapers in the strangely hushed car.

Nothing in the day's *Journal* was of interest. He folded it and put it in his lap. They were out of the industrial district, in the trees between suburbs. Too late in the fall: the half-bare trees looked bedraggled, the leaf-matted ground wet and boggy. He folded his suit jacket over twice and used it as a pillow against the inner window. It would have to be dry-cleaned anyway; he had spilled a few drops of Burgundy on it at lunch, right on the top of the right cuff, where clients would see it when he signed things.

"Hei broer! Watch out where you going when you walking backwards like that! Here, you need a hand with those?"

"Thanks, I got them." He heaved up on the straps tied around his two boxes and pulled them past the old man down the center of the train. The benches on both sides were crowded with migrant workers going home, jammed together hip to hip. Their boxes and bags were stacked on the wooden floor, leaving him just enough room to maneuver to the end of the car. There, because it was the last car on the train, he could set his two boxes in the middle of the aisle and sit on them, as several other men had already done. He greeted them with a lift of his chin.

"Where you from, *broer*?"

"Mzimhlophe Hostels. I did my eleven months there — now I going home. Home to Kwa-Xhosa."

"Home," said a thin colored man bitterly. "Just how is Kwa-Xhosa Bantuatan your home?"

"My folks is there," he said with a shrug.

"Your folks is there because the government moved them there," the man said. "Me, my home is Robben Island. It been my home nine years, and all because of one night's A.N.C. meeting at my house. They gave me two and a half years for taking subscriptions, one and a half years for meeting, and five years for distributing pamphlets. All the same night!" He laughed harshly. "Now I'm out, and they ban me! Clearly I must be meeting a whole bunch of Communists in those nine years, for they ban me the moment I out! Ban me to Kwa-Xhosa, where I never been in my whole life, where I can never see my family, for five long years."

The others laughed their sympathy. "That too bad, Pieter!" "You got to watch all those bad phone calls you make from the island, man!"

The conversation focused on the newcomer. "What your name?"

"Norman."

"What did you do in Soweto?"

"Bricklayer," Norman said.

The train jerked twice and they rolled out of Park Station.

"That against the law, you know," Pieter said. "If they pay attention to their own law, you could not have

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job. *Nie kaffir* bricklayers, *nie*!" — this with the heavy Afrikaaner tone. The men laughed. Several in the car turned on transistor radios, and the hard rhythms clashed. The train cleared the outskirts of Johannesburg and clattered through the outlying townships.

Norman looked out the window and saw three women sitting on a step, leaning in on each other in a stupor. Empty bottles. Blank faces under the streetlight. He recognized in the slump of their shoulders that moment of exhaustion and peace, and felt his own shoulders relax with it. He was on his way home.

The train swayed as it took a sharp turn. One last view of Montreal. He put his suit jacket on the chair arm and pulled a Sherman cigarette from the box in his briefcase. The punk next to him appeared to be asleep, although faint music still whispered from his earpones. He lit the Sherman with the gold lighter his boss had given him, and felt a certain uneasiness leave him, breath by breath. Hard to sleep on a train. Another station stop. The people in his car were mostly commuters. Briefcases, cuff links, polished shoes. The *swish-swish* of nyloned legs rubbing together; his head shifted so he could see the tight dress between the two seat backs in front of him. She sat two seats ahead. A man with a cough sat behind him. Muted voices came from the car behind theirs, until a door hissed shut.

When the Sherman was finished, he took a last look at the night lights of Montreal. The company's awards dinner had been in Montreal, just a month earlier, in the fashionable district downtown. He had expected to win the regional sales award for the year, because things were tough everywhere and he did have some big regular clientele. He took his wife along. All that backslapping and joking about the awards at the cocktail party before, as if no one cared about them, as if they were bowling trophies or something — when everyone knew they were a strong indicator of what the upper echelon thought of your prospects. So that in that sense they represented thousands of dollars — careers, even. So that looking around the room there was a part of him that hated all his colleagues, his competitors. Even more so afterwards, when he had to do like all the rest and go up to congratulate the winner, George Dulak, head of the Midwestern Section (which in itself was an advantage): beaming winner surrounded by envious admirers, shiny gold pen set cradled in one hand. . . . Finally he had gone away to get a drink. It was just like management to make the work a contest like this, to get them all at each other's throats. Competition more productive than teamwork: the American way!

"On Robben Island," Pieter said, "the *agter-nyer* is the one the warden uses to control the rest — he the

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guard inside, and gets the little extras you know, tobacco and such. But our *agter-nyer* was not a bad man, he help to get us food sometimes. And one night we was entertaining one another, Solly, he acting out the various guards and the wardens — all without one word, you see, but just watching him we knew exactly who he mean. And we giggling and brushing — we never clapped, you see, for fear of the guards' attentions, so to applaud we rubbed our hands together like so." They heard nothing of Pieter's prison applause over the talk and the radios. "And we in such a state we never in the world hear the guard coming, but for the *agter-nyer* sitting on the cement at the door watching for them. He been standing watch for us all those nights, and never let us know till he had to." He laughed. "A good man!"

"I been living in a prison, too, these last eleven months," Norman said suddenly, surprising them all, including himself. "A prison called the Mzimhlophe Hostels."

Most of them had been living around Sowęto in the men's dormitories that house the migrant laborers from the bantustans, and some said, "We hear that, *broer*!" But Pieter quickly disagreed — "nothing's prison but prison, man" — and continued telling stories of Robben Island. Norman was not listening to Pieter anymore, however; he was back in the hostels, looking over row after row of low gray brick dorms, their chimneys jutting out of asbestos roofs into the sky. One morning after a Friday night's drinking, he had gotten up and stumbled out of the dorm to the toilets in the next building — in the door, past the cement troughs for washing dishes and clothes, to the open toilet basins, there to retch miserably. As he returned to his dorm, he felt so sick he was sure he would die before his eleven months' stint of work in Soweto was up. That certainty gave him new eyes as he entered the dorm and crossed the dusty concrete floor, past the low concrete slabs on metal struts that were their tables, past the benches also made of concrete slabs to the sleeping cubicles, where men slept on the door-like lids of the brick trunks that held all their possessions. In the gloom it seemed they slept on coffins. Beyond in the kitchen cubicle, men were still playing guitars connected to little amplifiers, and the low electric twangs were the only signs that the men sitting around the small stove were still awake, still alive — a single candle on the slab beside them, shadows everywhere in the dim air, drying shirts hung overhead — and bitterly he thought, what a place to die in.

Perhaps he would get a drink. The restaurant car was only two ahead, and he was thirsty and needed to wash down some aspirin. He needed a drink. He stood and managed to step over the sleeping punk; debated tak-

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ing the brief case with him, but after all it was locked and no one was going anywhere anyway. Hopefully by his presence the punk would guard it.

Down the car. His balance was shaky; something wrong with him this night. He should have gotten a sleeper. Too much pride in his endurance as a traveler. Out of the soundproofed compartment and into the cold, jouncing passageway between cars. Here you could believe the train was really moving. Back into the hush of the next car. Only half the overhead lights were still on here, and most of the occupants were asleep. Some read or listened to earphones. Half their heads were shaved or tinted green or purple, it seemed. Craziness. His daughter, only fourteen years old, had brought one of those home once. He hadn't known how to express his disgust; he left it to Vicki, tried to forget about it.

There was a line at the little bar in the restaurant car. The two black bartenders went at the work casually, chatting to each other about vacationing in Jamaica, just as if there weren't a line. When one of them asked him what he wanted, he curtly ordered a gin and tonic and a foil bag of nuts, but his disapproval didn't seem to register. He sipped the gin and tonic — a weak one — to give himself some room for jiggling while he walked, then saw that the woman in the tight dress was sitting at one of the little tables. He sat at another and watched her as he drank. Not actually very good-looking. When he finished the drink, it felt like a million miles separated him from everyone else there. He stood and returned to his seat. Should have gotten a sleeper. Something wrong with him, some kind of tension somehow . . . had to avoid that kind of thing, or it was back to the Tagamet for him.

Back in his seat he stared through his reflection in the window at the world outside. Clanking red lights at railroad crossings, time after time. A sleeping town, even the neon off. Loading docks, laundromat, Village Video Rental. You saw a lot of those video places these days, even in the little backwoods towns. "Movies in the privacy of your own home!" and then it was gone. The drink began to go to his head, and the repeated hoot of the train's horn — so distant, so muted — was like the cry of some mournful beast, lulling him toward sleep and then calling him back, time after time.

The beauty of the Witwatersrand took his breath away. He had forgotten that such open, clean land existed in South Africa, and at the sight of it something in his chest hurt. White clouds sprawled across a cobalt sky, and there in the yellowwoods and Camdeboo stinkwoods dotting the sere grass of the veldt flew loeris, doves, hoepoe, and drongos, with small white hawks circling far above.

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Wild gardenia growing by the tracks. It affected all the men similarly, and they threw open the windows and laughed and shouted at the sky, aware suddenly that they really were going home. They danced in the aisle to the fast mbaqanga beat and sang American spirituals. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," accompanied by a fifteen-year-old boy playing harmonica for all he was worth — it was grand.

Then the train pulled into Vereeninging Station. Still in a celebratory mood, the men stuck their heads out the train window and shouted for the platform hawkers. "Dresses and aprons for your loved ones at ony five rand, *broers*!" "Not a chance, *suster*, you bore me with your dresses, let that *bierman* through to us." They bought dumpies of beer at an extortionate price, and downed most of them before the train rattled off again. Then through the outskirts of town: corrugated iron, donkeys, pigs, children, Indian corner groceries, pawpaw trees, women with washtubs, prickly pears, and scraps of paper everywhere, all over the hard-packed earth of the streets. "Oh, how I hate this town, the most hateful town in the world to me," one man cried. "My wife got off the train at this station and I never saw her again up to this very day." The men whooped their sympathy. "Wasn't that Georgina the hippo left you, man?" "She found you were undermining her interest with that girl in Joburg, didn't she? You lucky you didn't see snake's butt that day instead!" And the man laughed "hee, hee, hee," as he shook his head to deny them.

The man in the seat behind him could not stop coughing. A couple minutes' labored breathing, the strained efforts to control it — then ***kar! karugh! urrkhkraugh!*** He couldn't believe it. Next time, he thought, I'll drive. To hell with this. His throat was beginning to tickle a little, right there below his Adam's apple, and briefly he glanced over his shoulder in irritation. Old pasty-faced man with dark rings under his eyes, in a shabby gray suit. Italian-looking. Incredibly inconsiderate of him to travel sick and infect everyone else on the train. He really was coming down with it! He swallowed over and over. There was only a single light on in the car — some insomniac businessman reading *In Search of Excellence*, still looking fresh and unruffled at 2 AM. Yeah, you'll win the award, he thought angrily, and me, I'll just catch a cold. And all because of the luck of seating availability. He hated being sick. You couldn't possibly make a good impression with a cold. Sales out of the question. Might as well stay at home and watch Vicki take care of things. More coughs; it was enough to make him envy the sleeping punk his earphones. Although that would still be no protection for his throat.

Abruptly he stood and took a walk toward the restaurant car. It was

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closed for the night. Back between cars, in the cold passageway, he noticed that the train was moving very slowly. He looked through the thick little window in the passageway door. They were over water; Lake Champlain, he guessed. The railroad bridge was so old and rickety that the train had to cross at about ten miles an hour. Looking down he couldn't even see the bridge, it was so narrow. White mist lay over the water, swirling eerily under the half-moon. He shivered convulsively: something *odd* about this night, the hush too quiet, the distances too great . . . he must be getting ill. Or . . . something. For the last few years he had gotten his life into such a groove, such a routine of day to day activities, each day resembling its predecessor from the week before, Mondays all alike, Fridays all alike, Saturdays . . . that he had found himself with time on his hands. It seemed he could live his life on a sort of automatic pilot, leaving him all sorts of time to just . . . think. Like he really never had before. And once or twice in this new thinking he had wondered what it (*it* being his life, the world, everything) was all about. No great answer had jumped immediately to mind; often he was left with just this sort of uneasy feeling. Out there, was that another train? No, just mist. A lake of white cotton. . . .

Nothing for it but to return to his seat. As the night progressed he fell in and out of a half-sleep that resembled a trance. Several times they stopped at stations briefly, and once he woke completely when the police boarded to check everyone's passbooks. Two big white security police, making an old black ticket taker do most of the work. The migrants dug through their possessions for their reference books. Tins, boxes, old water drums bound with straps, all heavily loaded with basic groceries to help out the families on the bantustans. Norman's boxes were full of sugar, salt, and tea, all packed under his extra shirt and pants. His passbook was in the spare shirt's pocket; he pulled it out and bent the corners back down. All his stamps were in order, and he gave the ticket taker the book without looking up. Out the window Cape fig trees shaded the tiny veldt station, flanking the tracks like a hedge. Signs marked the entrances to the station house: BLANKES. NIE-BLANKES.

One of the security police took Pieter's passbook from the ticket taker's hand and inspected it closely. Suddenly no one in the car was talking. The radios babbled in Zulu and Xhosa. Then the policeman showed it to his companion and laughed. *"Robben vir Kwa-Xhosa! Die lewe is swaar nê, Pieter!"*

"Ja, my baas," Pieter said, looking at the floor of the corridor. "Life is hard, all right."

"Listen to me, *seuntjie*," the po-

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liceman said, and gave Pieter a little lecture: more God, *volk* and trek, as someone said when they were gone. Pieter resolutely stared at the floor. When the policeman finished, Pieter looked up at him, the hatred clear in his eyes. "My stamps are good, *ja baas*?"

"Ja, seuntjie," the big man said easily, and tossed Pieter his passbook. The two police led the ticket taker out of the car, laughing over something, the pass check already forgotten. "Cape town whores are best." "Moering kaffirs will kill you in bed, though!"

Then they were gone, and everyone started breathing properly again. Only now could they be sure that all the passbooks were really in order; often they were not, and so one didn't discuss the matter. There had been a good chance someone on the car would be dragged off to jail. But they were all legal this time, and the talk began again. "They stick him on the tenth floor by the open window, you know, but he refuse the jump and so he in jail and his kids is starving with hungry—"

"—you ever try sharing a bed with such a hippo? You got to sleep like a flea, ready to jump quick. And the fatter she got the worse her temper! Man I kissed Mother Earth daily living with her. Ha! Ha! She ransack me good sometime—"

"—*ja*, and if you get out, it's to the labor bureau like me, to sell yourself off to the coal mines of Witbank a thousand miles from home. We had a bad one at our labor bureau — he says, which of you boys wants a job, and of course we all jumping up and down like dogs, pick me *baas*, pick me, and he pick one after another to tell them no, they not good enough. Then he pick and look through my workbook, won't your wife sleep around while you gone, boy, I bet she sleep with me for giving you this job, until he tire of the game and give me the joy of eleven months work away from my folks."

"And that better still than prison," Pieter took it up; but Norman turned from Pieter's bitter comedies and looked out the window. Train noising out of the station with hard jerks, as if the engine were yanking on it. An old man sitting in the dirt by a wheelbarrow stacked with baskets; too late in the day to sell anymore, but still he sat, in that twilight moment. . . . SLEGS BLANKES.

He got up to go to the bathroom, feeling distant, disoriented. Stepping over the punk was getting easy — the kid was slumped lower every time. Once again, trouble with balance. Something wrong. Everything too hushed, almost silent. Like cotton in his ears. Everything a great distance away.

The bathroom at the front of the car was occupied. He turned and went to the car behind, the last one of the train. Maneuvered through all

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the tight turns and heavy narrow doors between cars, found an empty bathroom. For the disabled, but he used it anyway. Not *exclusively* for the disabled, right? Down the iron toilet he could see the track ties flashing beneath the train. When he was done he looked at himself in the cracked coppery mirror: hair mussed, face stubbly, some odd disquiet in his eyes. . .

The beer wanted out of him, and he stood up to use the lavatory at the end of the next car up. By now the travelers were drowsy with beer and fatigue, and he had to step over men sleeping in the aisles. Somehow they sprawled in a way that always left footing just where it was needed. Outside in the dusk the hillocks bordering the Orange River were etched against a moonless blue sky. Igqili River, he said to himself, mother of my country Azania. He stepped through the doorway into the connecting corridor, over the shifting joints of the iron floor. The joints squealed loudly and looking down at them he almost ran into the man coming his way. A white, from one of the first-class cars: confused, he said, "Sorry, *baas*."

The black kid muttered something under his breath, so sullenly that he was suddenly afraid he might be mugged right there between the two cars. The wheels rolling over the track were loud, no one would hear him: "Sorry about that," he said hastily, feeling dizzy, and yielded to the right. The train jerked and they bumped together hard; the black man reached out a hand to hold him steady, then withdrew as if shocked, his frightened eyes round and white in the gloom. Their gazes met and held.

The look.

Dark brown iris, the whites a bit yellowed; pale blue iris, the whites a bit bloodshot. And the pupils identical round black holes, the windows of the soul, through which one can fall, spinning dizzily, to land cut, confused, stunned, in a new place; and all with a look—

. . .He wasn't sure how long the kid's feral stare had held him still, when he jerked free and pulled himself, staggering slightly, away. The doors were heavy and had to be pulled into the walls to right and left. Back in his car the hush seemed more pronounced than ever. Unsteadily he stepped back over the sleeping punk, feeling utterly shaken. The plush maroon velvet of his seat arm. Silvery ashtray, sliding in and out of the arm. Long brown cigarette butts wasted inside. Looking around: such incredible, excessive luxury — and this was just a train! He stared. . . .

The migrants swayed with the train like luggage as he made his way in some confusion back to his boxes. Smell of sweat, beer, the hot veldt night. He ended his *dwaal* on his boxes and looked at his companions. Their clothes were frayed and dirty. Their shoes were broken and full of

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holes. They slept, or slumped in stupors of non-thought; and suddenly it seemed he could read what pain had chiseled in each worn face. The boy still hummed thoughtfully into his harmonica — bleak falling chords—

Finally they slid into the labyrinth of Penn Station. Darkness, trains passing by, their lit windows making them look like submarines. Then track lights everywhere. The punk woke and stood up. Everyone standing, stretching. He put his coat on in the aisle, feeling its smooth texture. The sick man was struggling to get his suitcase off the overhead racks, and awkwardly he helped him get it down. A haggard smile for thanks; he nodded quickly, embarrassed. A press of people (he held his briefcase close by his side), and he was out of the train, onto the long, crowded platform. Up a set of stairs, turn and follow everyone else to the next set. Up again. Into the light and glare of Penn Station's big central waiting area, with the businessmen and the students and the cops and the cleaning men and the bums. And then suddenly his wife was upon him, with a quick hug and kiss. Strong scent of perfume. She laughed at his exhaustion and held his arm as they made their way up to the street, chattering over something or other and pleased that she had found a legal spot to park their car. She drove, and he sat back in the deep seat and looked at the bright dashboard, at her: glossy cap of blonde hair, blush on her cheeks like two bruises, upper eyelids blue, purple, lashes spiky black. he thought: she's mine. This is mine. I'm safe. At a red light she glanced over at him and laughed again, lips dark red, teeth perfectly white, and quick leaned over to steady themselves as the old train clattered up the grade and out of the hills. Night passed, dawn arrived, they were in Kwa-Xhosa now and it was as if S.A. Railways had been a time machine, taking a century into the past overnight. Women they passed wore white turbans and led donkeys on dirt paths. On the plains before the blue mountains on the horizon were villages of circular thatched rondewels, whitewashed under the thatch and around the doors. Finally the train clanked into e'Ncgobo, past some men on donkeys and around the last curve to the small wooden building and platform that served as the train station. As the train rolled in, all the men stuck their heads out the windows on the right to look; but under the harsh morning light they saw that the station platform stood deserted, white splintered dusty planks utterly empty in the sun. Not a single soul was there to greet them. *And Thabo said to me, "So many had gone and come back, and so many had gone and never come back again, that no one waited anymore."*

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Chuck Rothman lives in New York, where is an assistant to the administrators overseeing the construction of a power plant. His short stories have appeared in Asimov's, *and a novel, STAROAMER'S FATE, was recently published by Questar. His first story for us is about a stowaway who presents something more than the usual set of problems.*

Playmates

BY
CHUCK ROTHMAN

The red light on the control panel told me someone was in the cargo compartment.

My finger was poised over the evacuation switch. Serve him right to get a taste of explosive decompression. But I knew I would have to forgo that particular punishment. I was carrying sanerol; the sudden change to vacuum would burst the containers, and the run to Dorado would be one big loss.

I don't like carrying drugs, even legal ones. Too dangerous; you get too many crazies trying to send their brains to warp. But the stuff was needed and the pay was good, so I accepted the contract. I thought no one in his right mind would want sanerol. It controls what they used to call schizophrenia. It doesn't get you up or down, just adjusts the chemical balance in the brain. For most people, it had no effect.

Still, someone wanted it. The light told me.

Luckily, I was prepared. I moved my finger to another switch and pressed it.

I could feel the vibrations in my gut; I knew my traveling companion was feeling much worse. I had equipped the cargo area with a sonic stunner. He'd be out cold in a few minutes.

After a suitable period of time, I turned off the sonics. Grabbing a tickle gun, I went aft to dispose of my visitor.

I swung open the cargo door and looked inside. I didn't see anything disturbed near the door, but that didn't mean everything was fine farther back.

I had to work fast. I wanted to find him before he came to. He would

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certainly object to the plans I had for him. When I first got into the freighting business, I had thought the rules were cruel, but after a friend was slashed to pieces by a crazed stowaway he had tried to help, I put my qualms behind me. I told myself that if I ever found someone hiding, I'd put him out the air lock without a second throught. Let him taste warp and be done with it.

I found my stowaway lying unconscious on the deck.

It was a little girl.

She looked to be about eight. Her hair was long and silky, the color of straw in the sunset. She wore a neat little spacer's jumpsuit, so clean and white that I realized it had just been bought.

I stared at her, dumbfounded. Then I put my weapon away. Space justice doesn't apply to someone so young.

I carried her into the main cabin and set her on the auxiliary crash couch. The light on the control panel was off. I had found my stowaway.

She moaned softly, then opened her eyes. They were pale blue, nearly gray. She looked at me for a moment, then said, "Please, mister, don't put me out the air lock."

Hell, I couldn't do that to a kid. But I decided to play it close to the space suit. "Maybe I will. Maybe I won't. What were you doing in there?"

Her face took on an expression I couldn't read. "Hiding."

"I know that. Why?"

"I have to go to Dorado."

I didn't say anything, knowing my frown would force an explanation.

It did. "My . . . mommy and daddy are there. They were visiting, but they were hurt, hurt bad. I had to go to them."

I remained silent, letting her say more.

With a quick motion, she reached into her jumpsuit. I tensed instinctively, but instead of a weapon, she pulled out a few scraps of dull green. "I have some money to give you." Her voice wavered between fear and bravery as she talked. "I need to see them. Please, mister."

I could see her story was the truth. Kids that age still aren't very good liars, and Dorado is the kind of world where tourists can get into a lot of trouble. It had been settled in some sort of a gold rush. That was centuries ago, but worlds like that never seem to calm down.

I considered. I had two extra cabins for occasional passengers; they were empty right now. It was three or four days to Dorado, and I could use company. You get tired when your only companion is a computer.

I might even be able to get a fare out of her folks. But if I couldn't, it was no extra trouble.

"Please?" she asked, holding up the crumpled money.

I made my decision. "Keep your money. You'll need it when you get to Dorado."

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She smiled happily at me. "Then you won't put me out the air lock?"

"Only if you don't tell me your name."

"It's Alice," She said quickly. "Alice Bruno."

Alice. I liked the sound to the old-fashioned name. "All right, Alice. I'm Fedrin Bedell." I smiled. "Now, is there anything you'd like?"

She nodded gravely. "Yes, Mr. Bedell. I'm hungry. May I please have some lunch?"

I never saw a kid eat so much. She gobbled down soup and sandwich and asked for seconds. She had a soft, pleading look that I just couldn't resist. Luckily, I was well stocked.

After she finished cleaning her plate for the third time, she smiled at me. "Thank you, Mr. Bedell."

"You were very hungry."

She looked downward shyly. "I didn't have breakfast," she mumbled.

"Probably for a couple of days." I rose and went to the stove. I needed some energy; it was almost as much work watching her as it is landing the ship. I decided I could use some of my favorite. "What were your parents doing on Dorado, Alice?" I asked as I rummaged through the stores.

"Visiting. Am I excused now?"

I found what I was looking for and pulled out the sealpouch. The aroma wafted up as I thumbed up the clasps. I sniffed it; it was almost the best part. "You can go," I said. I poured the brown powder into the filter and went to add the water.

"Coffee!" Alice said, delight in her voice.

I was surprised. "What do you know about coffee?"

"My mommy and daddy like it. Does yours come from Earth, too?"

"Doesn't grow decently anywhere else." I filled the water reservoir on the coffee maker and turned it on.

"May I please have some?" Alice asked.

I looked at her and shook my head. "Coffee's not for kids. It'll stunt your growth."

"Oh, please? Mommy and Daddy let me have it."

I studied her expression. *Now* she was lying. "Sorry, Alice. No."

"But—"

"Alice, I'm the pilot here. You're the stowaway. What I say goes."

She looked glum. "Yes, Mr. Bedell."

"All right. As long as you get that straight." I smiled at her. "But I'm really not a bad guy. Just to show you no hard feelings, I'll let you play with my computer. I've got game programs, you know."

A small smile brightened her expression. "Games?"

"Sure. Probably a few you've never seen. Something called Pac-Man. You've probably never heard of it, but it's one of the oldest games around —not even threedee. Been obsolete for ages."

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"Pac-Man?" she asked.

"Right. Found the program on a derelict freighter I was — oh, hell, you're not interested in that. Want to play?"

She nodded. "Yes. I'm good at games."

I smiled and led her to the computer.

She took to the game with surprising speed for a first-time player. In fifteen minutes, she had topped my best score and was still going. I shook my head. I think kids invented video games; they were all born experts.

I let the computer keep her amused as I went about my chores. They seemed to go easier. Every once in a while she would stop and beg for a snack. I found it hard to resist her eyes. I was spoiling the kid rotten, but what the hell.

I made an extra-large portion of nightboar for her for dinner. She finished it, and then asked for seconds. I heated up some more in the microwave, shaking my head. I decided that her folks were going to have to pay me extra for all the food she was eating.

After cleaning her plate again, she sat back with a sigh.

"Done?" I asked, smiling.

"Yes, thank you. I was very hungry."

"You certainly were. Do you have room for dessert? I have some ice cream."

She had room.

She looked up at me when she was finished. "Mr. Bedell?" she asked shyly.

"Yes."

"When will we get to Dorado?"

I shrugged. "Two or three days now. It won't be long."

"Can't we go any faster? I want to see my mommy and daddy."

"You will, Alice. Just be patient."

"But surely you can go faster."

"Some ships can. I can't. You should have stowed away on something a bit newer. If I try to press it, there could be trouble."

She pouted. "If you *wanted* to, you could go faster."

I nodded. "If you want to wreck my drive. Sorry, Alice, you'll just have to be patient. Your parents will be fine when we get there."

"But they *won't*. I know they won't"

Her vehemence amused me. "Oh? How do you know?"

She turned shy again. "I *know*," she mumbled.

I nearly laughed. "If you do, you're an awfully smart little lady."

"Please, Mr. Bedell—"

Her words were interrupted by the sound of cloth tearing. Her eyes went wide, and I thought I saw a look of fear on her face.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Nothing," she murmured.

"I thought I heard—"

"May I please be excused? I feel

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tired. I think it's my bedtime."

I was surprised by the change in subject. "Bedtime? That doesn't matter." Hell, there was nothing wrong in spoiling the kid a little. "You can stay up as late as you want."

"No. I'm very sleepy." She rose from the table. "Good night, Mr. Bedell."

"Good night," I murmured, perplexed.

She walked to her cabin. I watched her, and then saw the source of the ripping sound. There was a wide tear in her jumpsuit, at the small of her back. As she shut her door, the rip seemed to be getting wider.

I spent the evening cleaning up and then trying to match her score. I gave up just after midnight; I knew I had let a born champion at the joysticks.

I decided to look in after her before I turned in. When I touched the cabin door, however, it was locked.

It surprised me for a moment, but then I smiled. Her parents probably told her not to trust strange men. Still smiling, I went to bed.

The door was still locked the next morning.

I frowned as I tried it. I had slept late; I had expected to hear her darting around as though it were Christmas morning. "Alice?" I called.

From inside, I heard a soft moan.

"Alice?" I began to worry. Are you all right?"

My worry became worse. I grabbed the passkey from my pocket and unlocked the door.

She jumped up from the bunk when she saw me enter, frightened and — something else.

I stared.

She had grown during the night, a foot taller than she had been when I had said good night. Her jumpsuit was now just tattered strips of cloth, hiding nothing. Her hips curved outward, and I could see the wispy down of pubic hair. Her chest had also rounded, her breasts small but prominent. They seemed to be filling out as I stared at them.

"Alice?" I murmured. "What . . .?"

With a strange, strangled gasp, she was next to me, holding me desperately.

My mind was confused, but my body wasn't. She encouraged me, her hands touching me in ways that told me she knew what she was doing.

She looked at me, her lips moist and slightly parted, her eyes begging. I couldn't resist. I turned off my thoughts and let my passion lead me.

I'm no marathon man, but she wouldn't let me stop. She knew tricks I never knew existed, and this, plus her urgency, spurred me onward.

Finally, we were done. I lay on the bunk, exhausted, conscious only of her warmth beside me.

She was the one who broke the long silence. "Sorry," she murmured,

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sitting up and huddling into the corner of the bunk away from me, the blanket pulled up to cover her. "I always go crazy when the hormones kick in." She looked like she was about nineteen.

"What are you?" I asked.

"I'm not sure." She pulled the blanket tighter around her. "I used to be human." She shrugged. "Now I don't know."

"You're certainly no kid. How old *are* you?"

Her voice took on a deep, tired tone. "About a hundred times the age you thought I was."

"What?"

She sighed. "There is — let's call it a drug. A fountain of youth. Try it and you're a child again."

"For how long?"

"It varies. Thirty to fifty years. Then it wears off and you have to find it again."

"On Dorado?"

She nodded. "It doesn't keep."

"That's crazy," I said, not willing to believe. "Someone would have heard about it by now."

She shook her head. "The drug is . . . a plant. But only one in ten thousand has the right combination of genes and environment. Even then, it doesn't look different from any of the other plants of its kind." She paused. "Unless you've already found it. And tried it. Then you can see the difference. I suppose a spectrographic analysis might show something, but you'd have to find the right plant in the first place."

"And none of this has leaked out?"

"It did. People descended on Dorado like iron fillings on a magnet. But very few found the right plants. Eventually, it was all dismissed as rumor or legend." She shifted slightly.

"What's happening now?"

"It's wearing off. I'm beginning to age. I waited too long before trying to get to Dorado. And there were other delays and . . ." She shrugged. "I waited too long."

"What . . . will happen to you?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I'll just continue to age, I guess. Until I reach my true age."

"That's impossible. Nobody lives . . ." I stopped, unable to voice my thought.

"Yes," she said quietly. She stared at the opposite wall.

I was silent for a moment. "How much time do you have?"

She shrugged as though she didn't much care.

I made my decision. "I can try to go faster."

She looked at me, hope twinkling in the blue of her eyes. "Can you?"

"I can see what I can do." I thought for a moment. "If I really push it, I can get to Dorado in a day and a half. Would that be enough?"

"I don't know."

"I'd like to try," I said softly.

She seemed to study me for a moment, then nodded. "Thank you,

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Mr. Bedell," she said hoarsely.

I felt embarrassed. "Uh, I don't think we should be so formal. Call me Fedrin."

The dials were all in the red zones. I double-checked the instruments, but nothing seemed ready to blow. So far. At this rate, we'd be at Dorado in thirty hours. Either that or I'd be only an unhappy memory in the minds of my creditors and insurance company.

I didn't try to think what a mess I'd be in if I *did* make it. I knew the drive would be shot. I wasn't sure I could afford to replace it.

I put the thoughts out of my mind.

I found Alice in the ship's galley. She had dressed in one of my old sweaters and pants; they looked better on her than they did on me. In the time I had spent abusing the drive, she seemed to have aged another year or two.

"Hungry?" I asked.

She smiled, then shook her head. "No. I needed most of that for the growth; that's slowed down. But I would like some of your coffee. I don't get it enough now."

I told her to sit and fixed her a cup. She drank it black, her eyes filling with pleasure as she sipped. "You don't know how much I miss this. I used to drink gallons of it when I was an adult. Now it's hard to find and no one wants to give it to me." She sipped again.

"Alice — it *is* Alice, isn't it?"

She nodded. "My last name's not Bruno, though."

"What is it?"

She shook her head. "I'd rather not say. That was years ago." She took another slow sip. "This is good."

"Can't you buy it yourself?"

"No. I rarely have enough money."

"But you've lived so long!"

"So? I'm no smarter than anyone else, just older. And there are no shortcuts. I don't stand any better chance than you of getting rich by betting on a stramster race or winning the Idonian lottery. Besides, I'm not allowed to bet."

"But you could get a . . ." I stopped. No. No jobs. Child labor laws. "How do you survive?" I asked.

She shrugged. "This and that. Foster homes. Begging. Stealing. Occasionally prostitution."

"What?"

"You forget that some men are not as conventional as you are."

"But that's terrible. Why do you—?"

"Better me than a real child. I can handle it. But it's not a good way to pick up credits. Someone who wants me isn't interested in paying much more than a candy bar for the privilege. Even if they agree, they usually renege."

She spoke the words with the detached tone of a reporter talking about someone else. It made me shiver.

She toyed a moment with her cup. "It's not easy. I have the knowledge of an adult, but I can't show it. I don't

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dare let anyone see anything but the child. Too many questions. I don't want to be a lab specimen."

"I never suspected anything."

"No," she said wistfully. "After a while you become an awfully good actress And I feel like a little girl, even when I don't want to. My emotions, the chemicals in my mind, I guess, are that of a child. I can't help myself sometimes . . ." She shook her head. "It's all very frustrating. It's like you're not in control of the way you feel."

Her words brought a thought to mind; I had to struggle for a way to frame the question. "Alice, with what happened between us this morning. Was that—"

She nodded. "All the years I'm a child, I still understand sexual stimulus. But there's nothing I can do with it. My mind and body aren't equipped to respond. I just store it all away. When I age, though, and the hormones take over, all those years of suppressed desires burst out. It's hard to stop myself.

"Usually I make it to Dorado before it happens." She smiled. "I get pretty brazen, but I *am* making up for lost time."

"Why don't you stay there?"

She shuddered with disdain. "It's a damn ugly world. Besides, I'd rather see the universe. It's easy enough to stow away when you're a little girl —just pick a cargo that can't take vacuum." She shifted slightly in her chair and smiled at me.

I was silent for a moment. "Are there any others?"

"A few. Every once in a while, I see one of them. But we don't talk much." She shifted a bit more. "Fedrin, I may have asked a bit too much from you already today, but I'm afraid I'm still bursting out from my years of suppression. I need—"

"I know."

"If it's too much, that's all right. I never had only one man to myself before."

I shook my head. "It's not too much."

We made love gently this time, partly because of my limitations and partly because . . . just because.

I held her when we were done and stroked her hair, feeling the soft silkiness of it. She lay nestled beside me, softly breathing.

Eventually, she stirred and sat up. "You're very nice," she murmured.

I shrugged. "I do the best I can."

"No. Not just that. I knew when I first saw you that you were someone I could trust."

I smiled. "Especially when I didn't throw you out the air lock."

She smiled back. "Especially then." She stretched. "I knew you wouldn't try . . . to take advantage. I guess that's why I've told you so much about me."

I nodded, feeling good. I was about to answer when her forehead caught my eye. Instead of the soft, smooth

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brow that I had seen before, something new had appeared. They were tiny and faint, but no figment of my imagination: three shallow lines crossed her forehead.

"What's the matter?" Alice asked. I could hear fear in her voice.

I shook my head. "Nothing. Just . . . something I thought of."

But her fingers moved to her forehead. She touched it gently, a wistful smile on her face. "It's still happening," she said. Her smile widened, but there was little joy in it. "Now you'll be able to find out what it's like to make love to an older woman."

She laughed loudly at her joke. Then, suddenly, she covered her face with her hands. She shook, crying softly.

I put my arms around her. "Alice, it'll be—"

"I'm so scared," she said. "I suppose if I had any sense, I'd give up and forget about Dorado, only I've lived too long to give up now. Sometimes when things are the worst, it seems all I have is my longevity." She looked at me, tears seeping down her cheeks. "I still want to live, despite everything."

I wanted to comfort her, but I knew my efforts would not be enough. I got up.

"Where are you going?" she asked. She seemed afraid of my leaving, as though I were the only thing she had.

"To the controls," I said. "I'll try to get some more speed out of her."

• • •

The meters surged further into the red. Fuel consumption was alarming, radiation was beginning to leak through the shields, the acceleration was increasing gravity.

But it was worth it. It would cut four hours off our time.

Alice was aging quickly. Already her body had lost some of its firmness, her skin had become dryer. More lines appeared on her face each hour: deep furrows carved into her brow, crow's-feet by her eyes, laugh lines that belied their name.

When I wasn't squeezing out more speed, I was with her, talking, holding her hands. Each new sign of advancing age made her tremble. I think she feared it more than most people, having spent so many centuries without it.

Three hours from Dorado, her hair was pure white. It was becoming sparser.

"Can you find this plant you need?" I asked, worrying about the time we would have when we finally touched down.

"Yes. I planted some of the right variety in a safe place last time. It's a perennial; some of it should still be there."

She now looked about sixty—and feeble at that. Whatever it was that kept her youthful did nothing to make the aging easier for her. I had her lie on her bunk and conserve her strength.

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The clock moved too slowly for me, too quickly for her.

The drive screamed as I shut off the power. I braced myself, but there was no explosion. No fuel for it, probably. But I knew I'd need, at the very least, an overhaul. Maybe even a new ship.

I didn't care.

"Thank you, Fedrin," Alice said. "Thank you for everything."

I whirled to face her. She stood, her knees shaking, keeping herself upright by clutching the back of a crash couch. She looked about eighty. No, more. "Alice . . ."

"You've been a big help," she went on, her voice hoarse and frail. "I can take it from here."

I looked at her. From the strain on her face, it was an effort to stay upright. "You can't. You wouldn't make it ten meters from the port."

She shook her head. "You can't come. You must not find it."

I walked over to her and offered her my arm. She clutched it as an untethered spacewalker grabs a safety line. "Alice," I said softly, it's me, Fedrin. You want to keep everything a secret; I understand that."

"But no one must know."

"I won't tell anyone."

She looked at me; I thought I could see a hopeful expression flashing across her face.

"We've got to go," I said softly.

She nodded weakly

I bulled my way through customs, telling them my grandmother was sick. Since the ship was still in their care, they put up little fight. They could see the "truth" of my story by just looking at Alice; we were through in a few minutes.

I rented an aircar and helped Alice into the passenger side. She sat slumped against the window, aging before my eyes. "Where to?" I asked.

She murmured the directions, then closed her eyes.

I pushed the car as fast as I dared, trying not to break any speed laws and attract the local cops. I knew I wouldn't have time for any explanations.

We quickly were out of the center of the city. The buildings were sparse and more recently built; more and more vegetated patches were in evidence.

"Another two klicks," I announced as we passed one of the landmarks she had mentioned. I set the car on automatic; it would stop when we went the proper distance.

She lay leaning against the window, her eyes still closed. For a moment I had a sudden cold feeling, then I caught the slight rise and fall of her chest. "Alice?"

She opened her eyes. "Yes?" she asked, her voice a parched whisper.

"We're almost there."

A smile brightened her face, mak-

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ing it seem almost youthful for a moment. Then she shut her eyes again.

I watched her, as though my concern would keep her alive. Please, I thought. Please.

The car began to decelerate, then hover.

I looked out. All I could see were rows of green. "Alice? What am I looking for?"

"Flowers," she murmured, not opening her eyes.

I looked again. There was no sign of any color except green. Could the flowers be that color? How would I . . .?

A movement caught my eye. About half a klick off, a vehicle was driving between the rows of plants, spraying a multicolored mist of liquid.

I realized why the plants were in rows.

"Alice," I said, shaking her, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. "Did you plant these flowers on a farm?"

She shook her head weakly. "No farm."

I cursed. So the farm was new. The plants had probably been pulled long ago and discarded as weeds.

I felt sick.

I fought against the despair. No. I had come too far, worked too hard, to give up on her now. "Alice?"

She didn't answer.

"Alice!" I screamed.

Her eyes fluttered open. She didn't say anything.

"These flowers — what do they look like?"

Her eyes seemed about to shut again. I shook her. "*What do they look like?*"

"Umbrellas," she mumbled. "Upside down." Her eyes closed.

I let her rest. I gunned the motor and was off.

I broke every speed and traffic law in my search. Luckily, I was already far from any settlement, and I moved farther away, hoping to find the flower growing wild.

I didn't dare look at Alice. I was terrified of what I might see.

As the vegetation grew wilder, I slowed, scanning for spots of color. Twice I hovered just off the ground, my heart pounding until I realized the flowers I saw could not be the ones she described. I cursed the time I wasted in looking.

Finally, twelve klicks from the last sign of habitation, I saw them.

I came to a stop in a clearing, as near as I could get without harming any of them. There was a whole bed of them, maybe a couple hundred, blue and red and yellow. With the concave tips on their petals, they *did* look like upside-down umbrellas, each growing from a long, straight stem.

And maybe one of them was the right one. Maybe. I remembered Alice's figures: one in ten thousand.

Alice would know.

I shook her gently. She seemed

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too fragile for more. "Alice?"

Her eyes opened slowly. A milky film now obscured the blue. I prayed she could still see.

"Alice, we're here. I found the plants. You'll have to show me which one."

A faint look of happiness covered her face. She made an effort to rise, but could not succeed.

I lifted her out of the car. She seemed no heavier than she had been when I found her in the cargo compartment. It was as though she were evaporating away.

"Come on, Alice," I whispered. "Just a little longer."

I carried her into the plants. "Do you see it?" I whispered to her again and again as her eyes slowly shut as though the effort to keep them open were too great for her.

But she was trying; I could tell. Her muscles tensed as she battled to see. She was as anxious to live as I was to save her.

Then, suddenly, I felt her tremble. "Alice?"

Her arm moved, slowly, weakly. Her hand, now gnarled and bony, formed a half-fist. Her index finger remained straight, trembling slightly.

I looked to where she was pointing. A clump of five of the flowers waved in the slight breeze.

I tried to run, but was too tired.

Alice had shut her eyes.

I reached the plants and stared at them. "Which one, Alice? Which one?"

She did not move.

I set her down and grabbed the whole clump, pulling them, roots and all, from the spongy ground. I waved them in front of her face.

"What part do you need?" I whispered urgently. "Please, Alice . . ."

She lay there, unmoving. I wasn't sure I could see her breathe . . .

Her eyes flickered open. The flowers were just under her nose. Perhaps it was their aroma that gave her strength; she lunged her head forward and took a petal in her mouth. She swallowed it.

I moved quickly, discarding the rest, feeding her the rest of the blossom she had chosen. She swallowed the petals whole, then her head lolled back, as though the effort had used up the last of her strength.

She sighed and her lips turned slightly upward.

I knelt, staring, holding the dregs of the flower in my hand. I could not think; all I could feel was one overwhelming ache.

I don't know how long I was there before I noticed her breathing becoming stronger. The fact filtered through my emotion-dulled senses. I shook myself and examined her.

She was asleep.

The realization cleared my mind; a sense of relief bloomed inside me. As I watched her breathing deeply and regularly, I knew the danger was over. We had succeeded.

I picked her up and gently carried

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her back to the aircar.

By the time I got back to the ship, I could see she was getting younger. Her breathing was strong and healthful, and the lines on her sleeping face seemed slightly shallower. I put her on the bunk of her cabin and let her sleep. I knew there was nothing else I could do now.

Instead of waiting, I took the opportunity to take care of business matters. I was lucky: my clients were so pleased with my rapid delivery that they gave me another contract immediately. I managed to convince them to pay cash up front. That, plus my fee, plus most of the credits I had saved away, gave me enough to buy a used but dependable warp drive. I would have to work hard for a while to get by, but I figured it was worth it.

I felt so good, I bought Alice some clothes. A jumpsuit, like the one she had worn when she came aboard. I felt expansive; I went for the best.

I put it in her room. She was still asleep, but the color had returned to her hair.

I oversaw the installation of the drive. The workers looked at me as though I were crazy. I overheard one of them telling another that she had never seen a drive blown that badly. The other replied that the idiot pilot must not care *who* he blew up.

I just smiled.

The work was completed quickly. I had nothing to do until they sent over my next cargo.

After another day, Alice emerged. She wore her new jumpsuit. "Hello, Fedrin," she said, smiling.

It was strange hearing my name in that child's voice, but it didn't bother me. I was by her in an instant, picking her up, hugging her tightly. Her arms curled around my neck and she giggled.

I set her down. "Want anything?"

She nodded. "I *am* hungry."

I fixed her a quick meal of spaghetti. She ate it, playing at spindling the noodles on her fork. She didn't speak.

"Coffee?" I asked when she was finished, sliding a cup over to her.

She stared at it for a moment, frowning. "The cup's *dirty.*"

"What?"

"I . . ." She looked embarrassed. "Never mind," she mumbled, then sipped the coffee, savoring it intensely. "It's very good. Thank you very much."

I was amused by her tone. "You don't have to be so formal."

She looked at me, a grave expression on her face. "I do. I need the practice."

"What? What do you mean?"

She sighed. "Fedrin, have you thought about what happens next?"

The question surprised me. I hadn't; I had been too relieved to consider it much. "I don't know," I

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mumbled. "I just assumed we would . . . stay together."

She looked into my eyes. "Do you really want that?"

"What.? Of course I do."

She shook her head. "No. You just think you do."

"Alice that's silly. I *want* you to stay. We . . . I could tell everyone I'm your father. I could take care of—"

"Touch me, Fedrin. Touch me where my underpants cover."

The words were a shock. "Alice? What—"

"It's all right, Fedrin," Her voice took on a disturbing tone of seduction. "I *like* to be touched there."

I felt repelled. "Alice!"

She nodded wisely. "See?"

"See what?"

"Why I can't stay with you. I couldn't be your lover — oh, don't misunderstand. I'm glad the idea disgusts you. But I would always be a little girl. You would tire of me quickly."

"But it isn't just sex," I protested.

"But sex is part of it. You're an adult; you're going to want adult companionship. Could you bring a woman in here, knowing me like you do?"

"It wouldn't matter. I—"

"Would you want to remind me of what we never can share?"

I didn't answer.

"Besides," Alice went on, "you would see me, never aging, always the same little girl you see right now. And you will look in the mirror and see the signs of time marking your body. You will resent me; you will soon loathe the sight of me."

"No, I—"

"Fedrin," Alice said softly. "Listen to the voice of experience."

I had no reply.

She finished the rest of her coffee in silence. She set the cup down and rose from the table. "I want to go now."

"Can't you at least stay with me for a little while? I can give you a lift—"

"I don't *want* to!" Her hands went to her mouth for a moment, as though her own words surprised her. "I mean, it will be harder on both of us if I stay. It's hard enough right now."

"What will happen to you?"

She shrugged. "I'll get by. I always have." She looked up at me. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you've done for me, Fedrin. I'll always be grateful to you. I'll always remember you."

"Wait!"

"Why? The sooner—"

"Take me with you," I blurted.

She shook her head. "I can't. It'd be no different than if I stayed here."

"No, that's not what I mean. Show me the right flower."

"No, Fedrin."

"But we could stay together. We could be friends."

"Not friends. Playmates."

"What's the difference?"

"Playmates don't last."

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"But we're different. We could—"

"Fedrin, I told you. When you're this small, it's not just your body that's different; it's your mind, too. You will feel no attraction for me. Eventually I'll just be another silly girl. Oh, there'd still be enough of an adult to bother you a little. Some nights you'll even regret it. But the chemicals in your mind are not ready for serious friendship." She paused. "It's already happening to me. The way I feel about you seems so . . . *silly*." She seemed to regret having said the last word.

"We'd only drift apart," she went on. "Then you'd be alone, a child physically and emotionally, trying to survive in an adult society." Her face pleaded with me. "I know what it's like, Fedrin. I lo— . . . I like you too much to wish it for you."

I saw the fervor in her face and my million protests were stilled. "The voice of experience?" I asked.

She nodded.

I sighed. "You'd better go now."

"Yes," she said. She smiled slightly. "Don't be so glum. The universe is really a small place. We'll probably meet again."

I smiled back, not believing a word of it. "You're probably right. Good-bye, Alice."

"Good-bye, Fedrin." She turned; then, as an afterthought, she walked to me. I crouched down and she kissed me. It was not quite the kiss of a child.

• • •

Oddly enough, she was right. The universe is a small place.

Three years later I was wandering on Merari, searching for the address of a potential client. I heard the laughter of children from a vacant lot overgrown with scrubweeds and glanced in that direction.

I caught a glimpse of blonde hair, the shade of straw in the sunset.

I stopped and stared.

She was playing, chasing other children in a game of tag. I could make out the gray-blue of her eyes.

Suddenly she looked in my direction. Recognition flashed across her face, replaced quickly by regret. She shook her head at me, then ran off to join her playmates.

I didn't try to follow. My eyes were moist, but I think it was just the wind.

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Phillip Jennings lives in Minnesota and writes that he "fled Durham, North Carolina, abandoning graduate work in philosophy to become a computer programmer." His first story for F&SF concerns the remarkable events which take place on Kualap, a small Micronesian island.

Tadcaster's Doom

BY
PHILLIP C. JENNINGS

It was a fresh, breezy morning. A steaming cup of coffee sat on Admiral James's desk, and the morning agenda it puddled was delightfully clear, except for one name penciled in at nine o'clock. It was only 8:15, and if he chose he might make her wait, but he'd seen her outside, nodded and exchanged words, and she seemed nice enough.

He buzzed and spoke. "Let Miss Brandon in."

A slight, gray-haired lady was escorted into his office, a room in one of four Quonset huts facing a common yard on the outskirts of Chalan Kanoa. The admiral stood and gestured to a chair. "You say you've been bumped from the last two flights out of Guam," he remarked sympathetically. "It takes a lot of determination to get here."

A wintery smile flickered across her face. She sat, facing a beefy man whose round face was accented by ruddy, Santa Claus cheeks. The admiral's ramrod posture and crew cut supplied a military touch, yet he remained uncategorizable — one of those Americans who wandered Saipan in shorts and aloha shirts; bartenders, sales reps, CIA agents, and ships' captains mingling in a tanned and flowery parade.

She opened her purse and leaned forward to hand him a thick letter. "I'm retired now. I've been a schoolteacher for thirty years, and if you think that's no way to get wealthy, you're right. I spent my life savings to see you."

"To give me this?" Admiral James studied the letter. The envelope was quite old.

"It was written by my — well, almost my fiancé. Admiral, you're in a

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position to influence the fate of several Micronesian islands. Those H-bomb tests displaced the natives—"

"We don't call them 'natives' anymore."

"I don't mean to sound unenlightened. It's precisely their welfare I'm concerned about. The U.S. Navy has inherited a shelling range called Kualap. Now you're talking about, uh, decommissioning it and returning the land to civilian use. Am I right?"

"We've moved the people of Bikini and Rongerik, then Kwajalein, and Kili. None of those places is really suitable. Kualap has reefs—"

The lady shook her head. "There may still be a survivor on Kualap, and if so, the place is a dreadful danger to all humankind. No one must go there unless he or she is willing to live in permanent quarantine."

The admiral was known for his ability to sense the unspoken. "And you?" He smiled. "Would you do this?"

Lissa Brandon gave him a sharp look, then nodded. "You'll see why if you read the letter. You'll understand then. Go ahead. I don't mind waiting. I've spent my lifetime waiting. A few more minutes won't matter."

And so, with her eyes bearing down on him, Admiral James opened the envelope and began to read.

c/o Bischoff's
Tejain, Kualap,
Caroline Islands
November 14th, 1928

Dear Lissa,

You'll get this and subsequent letters in bundles. The mail goes out whenever a ship anchors beyond the reef to pick up copra, and that's not often. As Kualap lacks a harbor, we haven't the benefit of a colonial occupation, unless you count a family of Germans left over from 1914.

Herr und Frau Bischoff combine in their persons the medical, engineering, and religious facilities of Kualap. They promise to facilitate my entry into Kualapese society.

The Carolines comprise much of Micronesia, a few hundred scattered islands popularly confounded with Polynesia. Thus, you imagine me basking on dazzling sand, surrounded by bare-breasted maidens with sonorous names.

Sadly, the Lutherans among Kualap's lovelies now cover their breasts, and the beaches are used as latrines. High tide takes care of waste disposal.

As for sonorous names, consider places like Falik, Yap, and Truk.

Kualap is no tropical paradise. It's a property-oriented, class-ridden culture, with some folks "better" than others by virtue of birth. Places are invested with mana, and to preserve their quality the people have developed an elaborate system of taboos.

I'm using familiar Polynesian terms. The concepts they identify are common to dozens of cultures from the feathered-and-boned natives of

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New Guinea to ukulele-strumming Hawaiians.

This taboo/mana business is why I have to be careful. I'd lose face if I let myself be hosted by a fourth-rate chief, nor would it serve my purpose. Such a person would hardly be interested in the details of a social order not to his advantage. Folks at the low end of the totem pole are pleased to forget the past, become Christians, and eat food out of cans.

16 November 1928

It's two days later. I've picked this letter up again to save paper. You'll get my correspondence all at once, so why bother with a dozen envelopes and as many "Dear Lissa's" and "Love, Winston's"?

Herr Bischoff took me to the cliffs north of Tehain, Kualap's principal town, to show me the work he'd been involved with before the world war. I had the problem of harbors and commerce explained to me; something of great importance locally.

On islands with a history of internecine strife, certain areas are set aside for criminals and defeated warriors. The valley north of Tejain is such a place, and it doubles as a leper colony. Obviously the colony cannot be moved. Negative mana inheres in the soil and is far too powerful to be expunged by a Lutheran deacon.

Whoever decided this valley was taboo didn't have the modern freighters in mind. Such vessels can anchor only in the lee of the reef offshore from leperland. Supplies are boated into Tejain while the ships sit idle at a great waste of time and money.

The complaints of shippers had more influence on the German district administrator than did the misgivings of Kualap's chiefs. Bischoff was brought in to dynamite a tunnel connecting Tejain to a dock site in the valley of lepers, thus shortening the unloading process by six hours. The war intervened, and all that remains of this ill-conceived project is a cave eight hundred feet long, home to bats and spiders. The valley of lepers remains difficult of access. Since the Kualapese are not mountain climbers, the only way in is by boat.

19 November 1928

There are movements afoot to have me visit a paramount chief. Nanwe presides over a longhouse up in the hills west of Tejain. If I can record how he spends his time, and why, I'll have made a great start in my work here.

Meanwhile I'm learning the local dialect, the rules of naming, and some table manners. No longer is my left hand an unwitting instrument of defilement.

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20 November 1928

Today I hired a boat and went fishing near Chatap, a village at the southern tip of Kualap. We came ashore to share our catch with the villagers. Something I did offended the local headman, and when we returned to Tejain, *Herr* Bischoff informed me my visit to Nanwe was off.

I should find interesting the speed with which the news of my offense (whatever it was) spread from Chatap. As it is, I'm merely pissed. I'd considered Nanwe a noblesse oblige aristocrat, pleased to pass on the wisdom of his people. Now I figure him as a smug xenophobe.

I'm rethinking my tactics. Should I lick up after the noble relics of past times, as if they represented something "purer" than the affable townsfolk of Tejain? Wouldn't it be more interesting to study those natives making the transition to twentiety-century life?

24 November 1928

Persons of rank do not fish. Fishing combines two sins: the shedding of blood and the doing of work. *Herr* Bischoff thinks I may restore my reputation if I explain that what I was doing was mere sport, but unfortunately, the word "sport" does not translate.

So what did we do? Tried to teach the children of Tejain a few team games! Baseball turns out to be the best. Whereas the natives are horrified by the idea of violent body contact, the aggressive use of missiles and clubs is right down their alley.

I'm making a list of untranslatable English words. *Sport,* of course, and *Foreplay,* and *Female Orgasm.* In compensation, *friendship* and *democracy* have meaning only to women: Kualapese ladies have age-grouped clubs, but the men orient themselves exclusively toward superiors and inferiors.

Bischoff's school is disruptive for just this reason: boys are herded together and treated as peers. Consequently they play hooky. I suspect this will happen less often if baseball becomes part of the curriculum.

On another front, I've asked *Frau* Bischoff how leprosy got introduced to Kualap. "Hansen's Disease" is common on many islands, but I supposed it to be imported, like smallpox and the mosquito. I remember reading that it spread through Micronesia during the German years. She thinks otherwise: it's always been here.

27 November 1928

Two weeks on Kualap, and already I've committed every sin in the anthropologist's decalogue. I've taken sides, championing the yeomanry against their chiefs. Worse, I've in-

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troduced a novelty. Baseball is destined to become an important part of life here.

The social order has imposed itself. Only chiefs' sons can be pitcher/coaches. This makes things tough on umpires, as a native Kualapese would never call "ball" against a pitcher of higher rank. They recognize this failing and rely on foreigners to adjudicate their games. Our reward? Anonymous gifts of fish and flowers.

28 November 1928

Chief Ontef has invited me to visit his longhouse. I'll be wined and dined and thereby charged with the obligation of showing partiality to his son in the next few baseball games.

Are you shocked? Such bribery is normal here. The local code of honor is weak on what we call fairness, but explicit on the duty of the bribee to do as he's been paid.

I'll be rewarded by conversation with a chief of middling rank. I hope I've mastered the local dialect well enough to take full advantage of the opportunity.

1 December 1928

Chief Ontef and I had a splendid time! We talked astronomy. Heliocentrism is controversial and Ontef argued against it. I gently refuted his observations. The chief found my effrontery charming and has given me a name meaning "Mr. Nonetheless"!

My description of the planets was food for thought, and my reputation as a teller of fables was secure after I mentioned that Vega was the polestar ten thousand years ago. (Have I got that right?)

Undated First Entry

How different my handwriting has become! My fingers are numb, my body a mass of cuts and bruises. I'm sure I've dislocated one of the bones of my left hand — that, or it's broken.

Yet I write, and I do so out of hate. *Herr* Bischoff will find this letter and send it to you. He'll see that I'm revenged — and if not, you had better do so.

No, that's wrong. Excuse me, my mind doesn't keep on track. I've got the king of all fevers, but I can make my own justice, and if I do so, you'll need to show this letter to the Japanese consul in Chicago, and warn him that Kualap must be quarantined!

It's the disease, of course — and no, it's not leprosy. They call it leprosy, but leprosy is barely contagious. This thing . . .

Call it Tadcaster's Doom. It's the only way I'll be immortal. My own disease, a gift from Chief Ontef to Winston Tadcaster, once graduate

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student from the University of Chicago, now nemesis to the world.

After I got back from Ontef's soiree, I endeavored to be ill or busy whenever his son's team was playing. Still the time came when I couldn't weasel out, so I took position behind the plate, determined to make the best of it.

The second time Ontef Junior beaned a kid at bat, I waved him in and delivered a mild rebuke. That night four muckers tore into my bungalow and hauled me off, swearing and hollering. They wore face paint, but you'll excuse me if I don't give you a cultural analysis of the color patterns. As far as I was concerned, their purpose was to disguise their identity; and as far as I was concerned, it worked.

They dragged me to their boat, rowed me into the lagoon, and emptied buckets of blood, shit, and fish guts over my head. This was just the preliminary; the big joke on yours truly came when they tossed me overboard and paddled off.

I was a mile from shore. The current was strong enough to challenge a swimmer, and it took me northward. I'm not much on endurance, so I decided to make for land and let the other vectors force me as they might. It was a simple question of life or death.

A Kualapese might have thought nothing of forging for Tejain. Perhaps, in thinking Chief Ontef contrived that I should fetch up in leperland, I've wronged a man who only erred in overestimating my strength. On the other hand, why should he suppose I was in any better shape than the Kualapese upper class, a tubby lot who avoid work on principle?

And why make excuses for him? The bastard's killed me, and just because I told his brat not to throw baseballs at batters' heads!

Undated, the Day After

I went into Tejain two days ago and gathered my gear. That's how—

Undated, First Entry +2

My mind meanders. I've reread my last few entries, and they've left a lot of questions unanswered.

I washed ashore in leperland some weeks ago, and that's where we'll pick up the story. When dawn came I mustered enough strength to move from the beach, looking for fresh water.

I could see the lay of the land. A creek ran down the middle of the valley, but since I didn't know how leprosy is transmitted, I figured it was best to climb into the wet country to my left, tracing my spring to its source before drinking from it.

I did so, and quenched my thirst.

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Coming down again, I saw my first "leper". His skin was thickened into something like plate armor, and like plate it folded along a minimal number of horizontal creases. No joke, he looked like the Michelin tire man. His face was a caricature: broad nose, thick lips, both set off by fold lines.

He'd been on his own errand, claying himself to soften his carapace. He summoned me without explaining his purpose, and I followed, hoping he'd show me a way out of the valley. Not so. Leperland has a long history of accepting immigrants, and I was only the latest in the series.

My guide moved carefully, as if he might shatter. He led me to an empty hut. By that time he knew I wasn't a facile speaker of the Kualapese dialect. Still, by virtue of patient repetition, I learned that this was my place and that the garden around it was mine to harvest.

"I'm not sick!" I told him. "I'm here by accident. I'm not going to stay."

He shook his head. "You can't return or you'd carry bad mana to the living. Your accident was bad mana and it brought you here. Now you've breathed bad mana, and touched bad mana, and soon the sickness will come."

I couldn't accept this fate. I edged eastward to give myself an advantage, then broke into a run. When I reached the lagoon, I hoped to wade where it was shallow, swimming when necessary, until I reached the safety of Tejain.

I was in sight of the sands when I noticed that the palms ahead were strung with ropes. They hadn't been barricaded before, and in fact my trap was still under construction, extending itself to one side as I stood gawking. Uphill to my right a pair of "lepers" stood quietly, as if snaking ropes, shivering bushes, and flickering shadows were everyday phenomena.

I reversed course. Two lengths of rope now stretched to hinder my retreat. As I stepped over them, a third took shape around me and circled a tree trunk. Moments later I was thoroughly trussed up.

My captor was a shadow, a turbulence, a blur. He vanished, and I was left to wonder whether he'd been there at all. That's when the couple up the hill descended to read me the riot act. Did I understand that I was forbidden to leave the valley?

My fingers crossed, I answered yes.

That night I felt unwell. The next day I woke with a splitting headache. It's hard to describe the ways in which my body began to betray me. I had a sense of interior bulk that conformed badly to what I saw outside: a shrinking landscape, faded, inconsequential, and weightless. My skin, barrier between inside and out, stretched to an unendurable tightness.

Angefel (the Michelin man) nursed me through my subsequent

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fever. I was hallucinating, and the unreality was compounded by his unintelligible advice. Had he really spoken of grass that cuts like a knife? What did he mean by the time of dark sun?

The fever passed, but I had reason to believe that Angefel was right: I was infected and had best dedicate myself to learning to survive repeated flare-ups.

From his description, I anticipated that after two or three more episodes, I'd be subject to seizures of madness, during which I'd be tempted to perform physical feats beyond my powers. Oddly enough, he thought it sufficient to warn me; to tell me not to try walking on water, for instance, as if in my frenzy I'd remember his advice.

And oddly, I did. But let me continue the tale after I've rested. Frostbitten, slashed and swollen, my fingers are no longer facile with a pen.

Undated, Fourth Entry

It must be past New Year's by now, but my sense of time is so distorted I can't tell how many days have passed since I last wrote.

You wouldn't recognize me now; I'm discolored by bruises from head to toe. Where my skin has healed, it's leathery and insensitive. Yet Angefel believes I'll live for years; if you don't die of hemorrhage or blood loss after your first bout of madness, you learn to be grateful.

That's where we'll take up the story: my first experience of the "dark sun" phase of my illness, when suddenly my fever cooled and I felt an eerie and glorious relief.

It was gloomy inside my hut, so I stood and walked to the door. To my amazement, the air felt deliciously frigid next to my skin, yet hard to wade through, dense as water.

I pushed the door aside like a dried husk and stepped outside. Have you ever had dreams where you were being pursued, and try as you might, could only run in slow motion? That's how it was. I was nearly weightless, buoyant as a balloon, but my feet found little traction and the thick and icy air retarded my progress.

Perhaps I was in a dream, but I remembered Angefel's advice, and moved carefully, experimentally, mistrusting my own body.

I looked west to study what might have been a full moon, if not for its coal-red color. The sun? I averted my eyes, compelled by a lifetime of habit. Old Sol wasn't brilliant enough to leave an afterimage on my retina, but my reflexes tore a muscle in my neck.

How silent everything was! Hadn't the forest been full of chittering birds? Yes, and one swam through syrupy air, claws out to grab a branch a yard ahead. Her wings rose and lowered, and now she had but two-thirds of the distance left to go.

I reached for my wrist to check

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the rate of her flapping against my pulse. It took her four seconds to complete a beat, and my thumb left a purple mark on my skin.

Enough of birds. I decided to explore other aspects of this dream of mine, and float-walked off toward the creek. Along the way I passed some clumps of grass and was reminded of Angefel's warning. Grass was dangerous. Carefully I touched a blade along the flat side. It should have bent. Instead it tore in two.

The creek was filled with a clear goo, oozing silently downstream. The shoreside was sticky, and I retreated to drier ground where my steps wrought havoc among the foliage. Twigs shattered like glass, and when the simile sank in, I looked down to find that my legs were cut and bleeding.

By this time I was wretchedly cold, so I stood motionless to warm up. A deep, long, musical hoot startled me from my miserable reverie. It came from downstream, and having resolved that it couldn't be of supernatural origin, I moved to check it out.

As I advanced, the lonely note was joined by others, none rhythmically spaced nor oriented toward harmony. Passing the source of the noises, I reached the beach without noticing anything until I gazed toward the low sun and saw a bat, its outstretched wings limned against the ruddy light. The mystery was solved.

After gawking at the sluggish heavings of a coagulated-jelly ocean, I was ready for my experience to come to an end. My body was slashed, my calves slick with blood. If I were careful, I might make it home without exacerbating my injuries, where I hoped to lie down on my cot and wake up in a world returned to normal.

I returned and rested quietly for a long time, unable to sleep. How long, in truth I couldn't say, maybe an hour, but in that hour I might have made a dozen excursions as extensive as my first — I could have hiked to far Chatap and back, crossing the land of the living, if only the mountain between us hadn't been such an obstacle.

But was it? The Kualapese would canoe across the ocean to buy cigarettes in Yap, and think it no challenge, yet shake their heads when presented with a twelve-foot precipice.

Angefel had told me I could expect to spend half my days free of fever. I had work to do in my garden, but in my spare time I might reconnoiter for a relatively safe trail. I'd use it to steal into Tejain and raid for medicine. I'd collect my belongings, including this letter. Yes, and I'd take revenge on Chief Ontef for what he'd done to me!

These were my resolutions, and I cling to the third one intermittently even now. It's only because we've something to live for that eight of us survive in leperland. Suicide is the

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common way out, but Angefel has his Lutheran God and I have Chief Ontef.

Undated, Fifth Entry

What happened was this. When I returned to normal, I remembered the bats, and so, on legs caked with dried blood, I tottered off to the beach. A fellow sufferer kept an eye on me as I scrambled about on the south slopes, searching for their lair. He called to a second, and they watched until I found what I was looking for, a cleft in the ground.

The newcomer came forward. "What are you doing?" she asked.

I pointed to the hole. "Bats," I said, smiling and rubbing my stomach. "Yum!" I began to shift earth with my bare hands, and when I looked up from my labors, the two were gone.

You'll remember *Herr* Bischoff escorted me into his cave when I first arrived at Kualap. He pointed out the geology of the interior as we went along, describing the stone from a mining engineeer's perspective. He told me that his tunnel had pierced the rock and was extending into looser soil when the Japanese landed, said that a war had begun, and informed him that the Carolines were now under their occupation.

I'd no way of knowing how much dirt might have to be removed to complete Bischoff's tunnel, but given the rain and the tendency of Kualap hillsides to erode, I didn't think it could be very much, and this bat lair was located where the thing had been expected to break through, right next to the shore!

I enlarged the mouth, flopped onto my belly, and wiggled inside. It was dark, cobwebbed and twittery, and smelled of damp guano. I pressed forward, my heart pounding in protest. To stifle my incipient panic, I felt forward and up, encountering nothing but air. No reason for claustrophobia.

Yet fear spoke in my mind, disguised as reason. "Turn around; you don't need eyes where you can't see. If you advance feetfirst, you can focus your gaze on your exit and see where you've been."

I did just that, and humped my way rearward. For a time the floor was level, then it began to decline. As I backed down I lost sight of the exit. By now I was sure I was inside *Herr* Bischoff's tunnel, so I scrambled up and emerged from my hole into the light of day.

The rest was mere tactics. When the fever next came, I trudged to the bat hole, materials for a fire wrapped in my shirt, a flaming torch in my hands. I must have been a strange sight, but all of us were eccentric in different ways, and as I was no longer a novelty, I didn't have to account for myself.

I slipped inside and made my way

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down the incline to a region of larger, rockier rubble. This was shortly supplanted by a smooth floor caked in bat dung. I built a fire and shaped myself a clean place to lie down. By then my strength was gone, overtaxed by my exertions, and I was helpless to do anything but rest until the fever passed.

I could tell the moment it happened. There had been firelight; now I saw two near-dead coals, too dim to illuminate my surroundings. I'd have to float through pitch-darkness to the end of Bischoff's tunnel, where, if the sun was shining, I'd be able to see again.

Fortunately the tunnel floor was smooth and I avoided colliding with the wall. Soon the terminus came into view. Shortly afterward I found myself on the outskirts of Tejain.

Moving among human statues, I made my raids and carried medicines and belongings back to the tunnel, parking them as far inside as I cared to go. I paused to warm myself. As my toes thawed, the pain in them informed me that I'd scarcely averted serious frostbite. Nonetheless I set out for Chief Ontef's house.

Ontef wasn't at home. I satisfied myself by performing irksome pranks, throttling his chickens, upsetting his pots, and otherwise teasing his sister and her daughter, who reacted in slow-motion horror. As I pushed through the heavy air back to my hideout, I chastised myself for taking indiscriminate vengeance. I'd accomplished two of my three goals, but as far as I was concerned, the foray was a fiasco.

Undated, Sixth Entry

I'm dividing into as many personalities as my disease has phases. One of me remembers the University of Chicago student and a literature major named Lissa who might have married him, if only he'd got up the courage to ask.

Ah, Lissa, he's a dry husk of a soul and afraid of passion. For a day following the "dark" phase, he dominates; but as the fever begins to rage, he's replaced by a madman, a creature bent on revenge.

I've made another trip into the living world, and found Ontef's house burned to the ground, and so I know he cowers, afraid of the unknown, unless he's fled the island. And if this disease hasn't spread beyond the leper valley as a result of my excursions, then the truth is I'm not contagious during the dark phase, but only when I'm rational.

I should kill myself and vanquish the madman. Is revenge so sweet? What about the innocent people I endanger in my forays?

I haven't the courage to commit suicide. All I can do is write a warning and leave it in Bischoff's tunnel where he'll discover it, for I know he goes there from time to time. If I do this, he'll find a way to block the tun-

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nel and thwart my madness.

But if he does, he must leave a message to remind me of the world of the living. I recall my departed life as if it were a golden dream, and like a dream, the memories fade and grow unreal.

Undated, Seventh Entry

Lissa, listen to this! "You should know that the Japanese are increasingly dominated by militarists who would make strategic use of their Micronesian possessions, and as it appears that the Kualapese are abandoning their island, the Japanese talk of using it as a firing range."

It's a letter from *Herr* Bischoff, and here's what he says about Chief Ontef!

"He's an emaciated figure; you'd not recognize him. The Kualapese have their own form of justice, and not one person will feed the man. Yet they let him wander, as if to say that it matters nothing whether he dies today or a month from now. Since he's already doomed, the implementation of the sentence is a trivial matter.

"He ought to cross the lagoon and dwell with you. Everyone admits that. Low as he's become, the fact that he remains here demeans him all the more. His family has fled the island out of embarrassment and fear. Still, because of consanguinity, those who linger grow ever more uncomfortable, fearing your revenge."

Lissa, do you understand what this means? The madman *must* be satisfied by this! I've been wronged; the world of the living admits it and is preparing a sacrifice!

Though the mountain is no absolute barrier, I can wait now that the tunnel is blasted shut. I can wait until my fellow lepers die and the Kualapese depart, and all that remains are me and my foe, hunter and hunted, ducking the shells of the Japanese!

I'll be a nightmarish sight, a monster to haunt his dreams. My skin is hardened now, calloused to a turtleshell thickness. When I'm cut I don't often bleed. During the fever stage I heal rather better than a normal person; necrotic tissue stops spreading and sloughs off, and splintered and broken bones meld together, though not without disfigurement. I may live for a long time.

Admiral James looked up. For a moment he and Miss Brandon stared at each other, then James spoke. "How did you get the letter? *Herr* Bischoff—?"

She nodded. "He was among the last to leave."

"The Kualapese fled? Voluntarily? All of them?"

"Winston couldn't be trusted to keep in the taboo area. He hadn't been educated with their respect for mana. He'd shown that by his first excursions, and now whenever any

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thing was out of place, the people were convinced it was him. They lived in terror. Emigration was their only choice.

"Bischoff plundered Tejain for abandoned supplies, rowed up the lagoon, and cast them onto the leperland beach. About the time he finished, this letter appeared. It was some while before he could bring himself to touch it, but since Winston's first message had done him no harm, he persuaded himself to carry it off."

"And sent it to you."

She shook her head. "He went home to Germany. I doubt he ever intended to forward the letter, since the Lissa of Winston's imagination was no longer a flesh-and-blood person, nor could the news of Winston's fate be anything but upsetting to me. Then came World War II, and hard times afterward. An American friend might mean the difference between life and death, so he mailed it off. Eventually it found me."

Admiral Jones stood and moved to his window. With his back to Miss Brandon, he spoke again. "Would it comfort you to know we've good excuses to decide against resettling Kualap? We don't need this letter in the record, not if you prefer to keep it private."

He turned. "I'll see that the place stays as it is, though we're under pressure the other way. The people of Bikini prefer a home among the Marshall Islands. Anyhow, for reasons you've just explained to me, Kualap has a bad reputation."

"Will I be permitted to go there?" the old woman asked.

"A medical mission, perhaps—something scientific . . ."

"They'd never agree to a lifetime quarantine. I would."

The admiral leaned forward. "Do you know how to grow breadfruit? Yams? How would you feed yourself?"

"I've studied, Admiral James. I know how to survive."

"I doubt that. In any case there's not much chance Mr. Tadcaster's still alive. He'd be in his sixties."

"He'll be sixty-two. I'm a year older, without family and no longer useful to society. Not unless you let me go."

James returned to his chair. "I'm just writing an idle script, but if a certain retired schoolteacher turned criminal, she'd have to find an accomplice, then hire a boat and sail off to the southwest . . ."

Miss Brandon shook her head. "Don't worry. I'm not rich enough to do those things."

James pondered and spoke again. "By going to Kualap you'd betray him. He'd want his disease to die out with its last victim. You might manage to catch it, keep it going . . ."

"Would that be so bad? Part of Tadcaster's Doom is an ability, a talent we may need someday. As a military man you should consider the prospect. American marines, moving

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twenty times faster than their enemies, ducking bullets—"

"You're as cold-blooded a romantic as I've ever seen. No, madam. If you won't be jollied into changing your mind, I'll tell you flatly: civilians are forbidden on Kualap. It's my job to enforce the rules, and you've given me fresh reason to do so."

That night the supply depot at Naval HQ was entered and valuable radio equipment was stolen. Six weeks later, and for the first time in thirty-seven years, a boat crossed the reefs of Kualap. While the passenger bailed with a vigor belying her age, a young man clad only in a *thu* lowered the sail and started the outboard motor. The vessel angled southward, bearing for a place once known as Chatap, where, in view of its distance from leper valley, Lissa Brandon deemed it safe to disembark.

En route to Yap the returning craft was intercepted by the USS *Albermarle*, diverted from duty off the shores of Vietnam. Miss Brandon's accomplice had no idea how close he came to being blown out of the water. As it was, in the interest of keeping him at a distance, he wasn't even arrested.

Four days passed before Miss Brandon broke radio silence. "He's here," she repeated several times. The signals officer forwarded the message to Saipan.

Admiral James authorized a response: "What is his condition?"

The answer came. "Ugly. As for his mind, there's hope. He delivered a six-hundred-page letter to me this morning. I've got a bad headache but will read it when I feel better."

The signals officer transmitted a second message. "I'm instructed to fix your position so we can avoid that vicinity in future shelling operations. Please continue to broadcast while we triangulate."

"Really?" came Lissa's answer. "*Avoid?* Thanks for your solicitude, but I'll take my chances. Winston and his friend have had a long time to build bombproof shelters."

"Identify friend."

"The man who motivated him to stay alive until he learned to adjust. Ask the admiral to tell you about Chief Ontef." With that she switched off her transmitter. The *Albermarle* circled the reefs for two more days, but nothing more was forthcoming.

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Installment 16: *In Which A Forest Is Analyzed Without Recourse To Any Description Of A Tree*

There are a few things in this life I have not gotten around to doing. I never did get that date with Sally Field, though I went so far as to script a segment of *The Flying Nun* for just such an opportunity. Never did drop that sugar cube drenched in acid given to me in 1968 by a well-known sf writer, though it lay wrapped in cellophane in the back of my refrigerator until 1980 when it was thrown out with a package of celery that had developed the consistency of Gumby and several Idaho potatoes which had grown such a set of eyes that we had to take the poor things in to have them fitted for contact lenses before they could be dumped. Never got to meet John Gardner, to tell him I admired his work but thought he was a meanspirited man. Still haven't had a homosexual encounter. I've got the shoes, but still haven't gotten around to taking tap dance lessons.

These are important things I wish I had done, but the chances of getting around to them now seem slim, particularly if I'm going to get around to climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, which I swear I *will* do, just stop shoving. Similarly, I have never gotten around to reading Barry B. Longyear's novella "Enemy Mine."

I should, I *know* I should; but, well, I put it off, and I put it off, and

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I put it off, and then it won the triple crown in 1979 — Hugo, Locus poll and Nebula awards — and Barry got the Campbell award as Best Writer that same year, and I had to start lying when people talked about the yarn. "Oh, sure," I'd say, "some helluva piece of work. Just brilliant." But then I'd quickly switch the conversation to Céline or W. P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe*, which I *had* read, god forbid anyone would think I was inadequately prepared for social congress.

But now that I've set myself the chore of discussing ENEMY MINE (Twentith Century Fox), I can't use flummery to cover my sin of omission. It is certainly going to enrage my critics that my unceasing dumb luck triumphs once again, because by *not* having read the story it redounds to my (and your) benefit in my capacity as film critic for this august journal. Dump me in cow flop and I'll come up with the Hope Diamond.

I've been wanting for some time to review a film in this genre that is based on a well-known published story, the original version of which I had never read. Purity of vision, is what I was hoping for. A total freedom from the mist and shadow of the original work. Couldn't do that with *Dune* or *Blade Runner* or *2010* or a host of others, because I was already "tainted" by a familiarity with the sourcework. So here it falls right in my lap, this secret shame I've borne since 1979, and (damn that Ellison, doesn't he *ever* fall on his face?!)*ba-doom!* it's a court-martial that turns into the Distinguished Service Cross.

So I went to my screening of *Enemy Mine*, looking forward to a movie that I'd enjoy — which is the way I go to *all* of them — and I came away thinking it hadn't been such a terrific film at all. Not a thorough stinker, not a *Damnation Alley* or *Outland* or *Gremlins*, but simply a flick that seemed to have had a chance to be 108 minutes and 4 seconds of pretty entertaining adventure. It left me, how shall I put this, unfulfilled. Like a long meal of cotton candy and readings from Kahlil Gibran.

I'll recap the story for you, in the event you've also been lying about having read the published version, and haven't caught the film. Won't take long.

Well, Robinson Crusoe, this human being, crashes on a sort of volcanic island called Fyrine IV, and he finds he's not alone there. This *other* castaway, Friday, also lives there. And at first they don't like each other, and then they do like each other because they've got to work together to survive, making a hut out of palm fronds or creature carapaces or like that. And in the end we understand that it doesn't matter that Friday is a black man with a funny way of talking and Robinson Crusoe is a kind of thick-headed whitey, because under the scales and cranial crests, we're all the

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same, and we call that brotherhood.

Wait a minute. I think I'm getting my movies mixed. Lemme try again.

Okay. So this white convict named Tony Curtis is handcuffed to this black convict named Sidney Poitier, and they manage to escape from this state work farm, called Fyrine IV, and at first they don't like each other, and then they do like each other because they've got to work together to survive the posse out to find them, and in the end we understand that it doesn't matter that this white guy is actually a Jew named Bernard Schwarz or that this black guy is actually an ex-basketball player named Lew Alcindor, because beneath the spacesuits and overacting we're all handcuffed together in the big prison break of Life, and we call that brotherhood.

Uh. I think I've mixed things up again. Let me go for it just once more.

Okay. So there's this U.S. Marine on a South Pacific island called Fyrine IV where he's forced to work with this alien creature called a nun, which is a female kind of person who dresses all in funny kinda clothes, and who is played by Deborah Kerr, who's really swell at playing this kind of alien creature, and at first they don't like each other, and then they do like each other because they're trying to stay out of the way of the entire Imperial Japanese Navy and because they're both pretty horny, and the Marine, whose name is Mr. Allison, suggests that it doesn't matter that she's this alien kinda creature, they should take off their clothes and their bad habits and sorta have social congress because they're all alone on Fyrine IV and who's to know, and the nun alien tells him, "Heaven knows, Mr. Allison." And from this we understand that it doesn't matter how weird you dress or whether you're a 20-year career man in the Marines, nuns ain't gonna let you screw them unless you're extremely glib, and we call that brotherhood.

Er. Wrong again? Well, then, how about *Hell in the Pacific* (1968) with Lee Marvin and Toshiro Mifune, which was all about this Japanese space pilot and this American space pilot who get stuck on *another* South Pacific island *also* called Fyrine IV (a Melanesian name that means *dēja vu)* and at first they don't like each other, and then they do like each other because they both agree that if Robert *Mitchum*, for crine out loud, can't get laid, then what chance do *we* have, particularly with Deborah Kerr who *should* have been easy, considering how she rolled around in the surf with Burt Lancaster. And we understand that we should call this brotherhood. Or the birth of the blues.

All right, I'll get serious. I wasn't even disappointed in *Enemy Mine,* because for all its overproduced affect — you should see the weapons and ships and the suits and the communications gear: none of it form-

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follows-function but shiny and futuristic and must have cost a *for*tune — the movie has all the staying power of a Dalkon Shield. But the other day a famous sf film producer stopped by to chat — and I'm purposely *not* dropping his name — and he called *Enemy Mine* "megadumb." Which impressed me, because I hadn't thought it was *that* bad, and I'm curious to know if you readers thought it was "megadumb" also, and if so, why. Which comments I'll boil down and run in a forthcoming installment, depending on how vitriolic and original and clever you are with your denigrations. See preceding for format.

But just so you don't go for the obvious missteps the film makes, I thought I'd list a few of the more glaring, thereby throwing you back on native cunning and that dormant sense of filmic discrimination I know lies deep in each of you.

First, they begin the outer space stuff without sound. Nice, I thought. They went the Kubrick route instead of the George Lucas route. Then, of a sudden, they scramble the starfighters and we are treated once again to the *Star Wars* space dogfight a la Industrial Light and Magic, which firm continues to be hired by all and sundry to produce space battles in a vacuum that doesn't seem to hinder spaceships from acting like Spads and Fokkers, and they all go whoooooosh and blow up with big bangs slightly smaller than the Big Bang.

Second, though we never see much of Fyrine IV except these fumaroles they shot down in the Canary Islands, and all this petrified wood or whatever, both the human and the alien can breathe without artificial assistance, and I just wonder how that can be on a planet without any greenery to produce oxygen, but I suppose Poul Anderson or Hal Clement could explain how it *might* be possible, which doesn't detract from the quibble because if it *is* possible, they should have given us at least a *small* indication, don't you think? I sure do.

Third, the mood of seriousness that hangs like a gray day over this entire production is gratuitously, and ridiculously, ripped apart by one of the silliest missteps I've ever seen made in a film put together by supposedly professional moviemakers. There is a sequence early on, in which a scuttling creature with a Chelonic carapace is trapped and sucked down into a sand pit by something like an ant lion with nasty complexion and one helluva glandular condition, and it gets sucked down screaming horribly, so we know either the human or the alien will soon be confronting the same problem, and we're scared for a moment until . . . the carapace is flung back up out of the hole and we hear . . . a burp. A low-comedy burp. And everyone laughs. And the mood is broken.

Fourth, that speech near the end where the big bully miner is fighting

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with the human space pilot, and he does one of those Jimmy Cagney routines about, "I'm gonna kill ya, cuz you killed me brudder Joey." And everyone laughs. And the mood is broken.

Well, that's just a sample. You can't use those when you write in. And don't complain that the human space pilot is carrying a bullet-firing pistol instead of some sort of laser gun, because it's logical that projectile weapons would still be in use as a personal defense a hundred years from now, because the engineering it would take to devise a way of mirror-stacking to make a laser small and portable, is way beyond the abilities of a society as dumb as the one presented in *Enemy Mine*. Also, drop a laser gun, smash one mirror, and you're up the Swanee without a scull. So that one's okay. But only because we were clever enough to figure out why, no thanks to the producers of the film.

So here's your chance to dabble in film criticism. Unleash those Visigoth tendencies! Defame multimillion dollar epics! Voice your paralogical opinions! Savage the great and the near-great! See what fun it is, and you'll understand why I wouldn't trade the writing of this column for anything in the world. Except maybe a date with Sally Field, things being the way they are between Deborah Kerr and me.

• • •

ANCILLARY MATTERS: By now you've no doubt learned that Terry Gilliam's wonderful sensational terrific glorious awesome *Brazil* is in release, in its acceptable length. No doubt many of you are taking pleasure in my having said nyaah nyaah I saw it and you never will, and *ba-doom!* there it is for you to see. So go ahead and have your nasty little laugh. I am content: because of articles such as mine, Universal knuckled under to Art; and I don't mind looking the fool once again. *I* know I'm a saint, so there!

One more thing. While I understand that puns are, for the most part, the highest level of wit available to a lot of sf fans and readers (a singularly humorless lot I often think), nonetheless it behooves me to point out to the reader who wrote in accusing me of stealing the Monty Python dead parrot routine which I integrated into my column several installments ago, because I didn't belabor it by pointing out that it was a Python shtick (which you knew anyway), that this was something known as *parody*. Or parroty. Or something.

And to the reader who accepted at face value my statement that sf was dead as a filmic genre (only to take it back two issues later), this was a literary technique called *engrossment*. Sometimes referred to as *satire*. The art of the *jongleur*.

Some of you act as if you are miraculously free of the ravages of intel-

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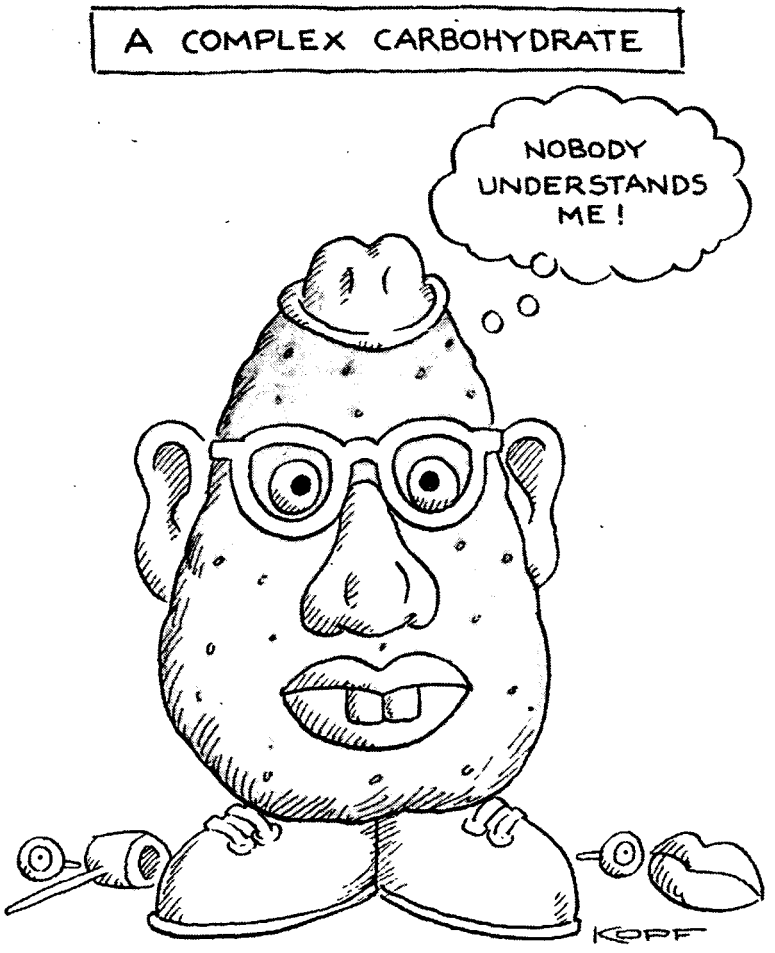
ligence, and I'm going to tell you kids this just once more, and then to hell with you, you'll just have to wait till your father gets home at which time you're going to get one helluva licking: some of this crap is supposed to be taken with a smile.

You know how to smile, don't you? Just attach fish hooks to each side of your flaccid lips and give a yank straight up!

And that's what we call brotherhood.



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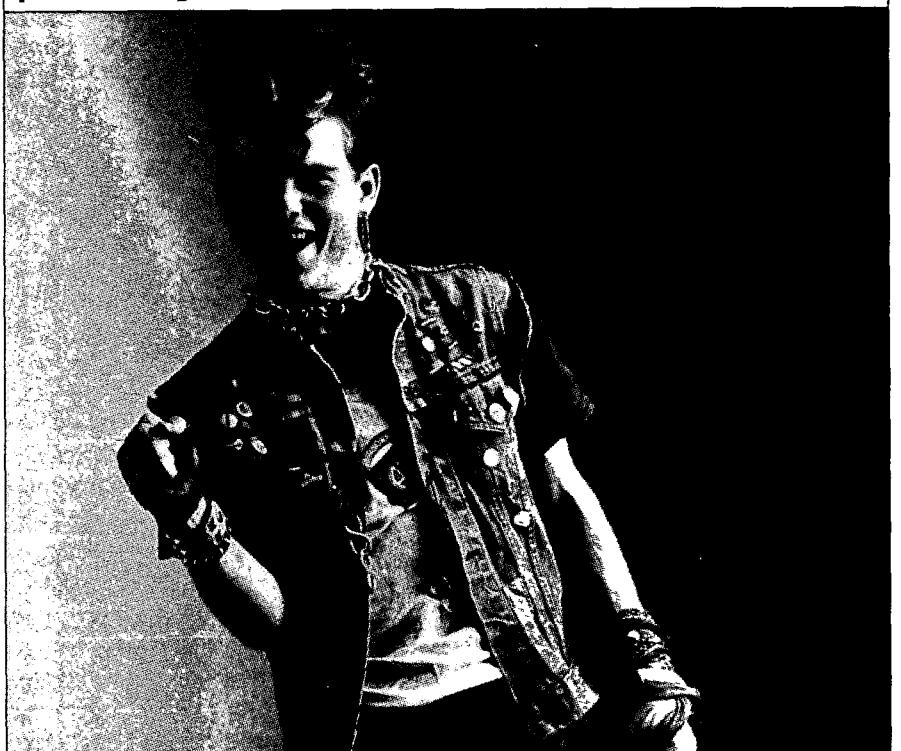
We don't care if you paint your hair blue, rip the sleeves off your shirt or pierce your ear.



But don't smoke just to be like your friends.
Or to be different from your friends.
Or to be anything at all.
Because the simple truth of the matter is that with everything we know about cigarettes today, there's only one thing you'll be if you start smoking now. And that's sorry.
Sorry you can't get up in the morning without coughing your lungs out. Sorry you can't climb a single flight of stairs without getting winded. Sorry that every time you light one up, your risk of heart and lung disease goes up.
And most of all, sorry that the casual habit you began as a teenager has turned into one you could die trying to break.
If you're already a smoker—or if you're considering becoming one—take some time to stop and think it all the way through.
Right now, it's your decision. In the long run, it's your life.

WE'RE FIGHTING FOR YOUR LIFE

American Heart Association

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A pleasure to welcome one of SF's premier novelists back to these pages with a rare short story, a not entirely serious account of an alien who is entirely out of his element.

The View From the Top of the Tower

BY
HARRY HARRISON

Stately, plump Sean Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressing-gown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him by the mild morning air. He held the bowl aloft just as a voice skrilled up the stairwell behind him.

"You'll catch your death," Molly sirened, her penetrating voice in full volume capable of cracking a Guinness bottle at twenty paces. "But you would live in a Martello Tower — saving money you said — but no jacks and damp as a Kerry bog, then shaving on the battlements, Jeezus you'll be struck by lightning . . ."

Sean tuned out the meaning from her words, but the breakers of sound still crashed over him like waves of snotgreen sea. He shaved too fast, nicking out bits of skin until the lather in the bowl turned roseate, whiskerspeckled. With a swish and a grunt, he hurled the foamedwater from the gunport, then hurried back below. Yet still the voice broke over him, yet still he did not hear as he pulled leg into trouser, draped tie about neck, speckled bits of toilet paper on bloodspotted skin, fled downward, earthward, drinkward. Past the Forty Foot and pantingly past Bullock Castle toward sanctuary Sanctus sanctorum. The Arches beckoned, and he obeyed.

With the genius of years, the door was unlocked at the precise moment he pressed against it, pushed through, stumbled forward, leaned stout elbow on stouter bar, and breathed the blessing into the stout, expectant air.

"A pint of the black."

You've cut yourself shaving?" Noel said in tones of utmost gloom, the on-

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ly melody that ever issued from his barrel chest, as he filledfull the glass, brightyellow above brown.

"I have that, and lucky not to have done myself from ear to ear with herself in full spate this morning. The voice of her, it only improves with age."

"Aye. They'll hear her in Wexford next."

"Say Ballina and be done."

Last wipe of strigil, passed over and down, raised high and admired, first touch on tongue, first gorgeous glottisgorging, first sight of lifereturned. *Pax vobiscum, pox humanum.*

For Portakal, Earth was a flowing font of language. He had been the first student, the only student on his home world, dark planet of an iceblue star on the far side of the galactic lens, to master the difficult art of mental projection. When Lakatrop had been possessed by the alien intelligence, Portakal alone had talked with him and had discovered what had happened. Through mental projection the mind could travel, could occupy the body of another intelligent being, no matter what its form, no matter what distant world it inhabited. Before Lakatrop's possessor had left, bored by the sluggish, cold world and the almost total lack of interest in his presence, Portakal had learned the projection technique. The tachyon source could be grasped, understood, utilized only by force of will alone. And his will was strong, driven by his need to communicate in other than the muffled tones of his race. Sluggish and thick, they oozed along at the bottom of their dense, chill atmosphere, where liquid and gas merged and changed, speaking only with the greatest effort against the pressure of thousands of miles of gas above. For this reason their language was stripped and truncated, bare and unadorned, brief and brutal. He was the only linguist, self-taught and lonely, for who needs linguists when the language contains only 112 words?

What paradise this green, warm world of Earth! Twice before Portakal had journeyed here, entered the mind of Earth-dwellers, to speak and revel in the richness of language, to learn and remember. It did not bother him that he had to walk with two legs instead of twenty, lacked tentacles and extra eyes on his fingertips, nor did he even miss the pingle-organs that made copulation so intriguing. No sacrifice was too great when it aided his linguistic research.

It bothered him slightly that his first research attempt had ended almost as quickly as it had begun. His spoken Zulu was quite primitive, since the unfortunate body he had controlled had been burned as a witch soon after his arrival. His second occupation, in Japan, had been more successful, since he had concealed his presence most of the time. His re-

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luctant host, a geisha girl, had lived long enough for him to completely master her language, until he had thoughtlessly walked her in front of a Bullet Train while preoccupied with sister-brother, shimai-kyoodai interrelationships.

Now he was ready to research again. His mnemonic notes on Japanese had been scratched into steel-hard ice by his ventral claw. He clacked ten or eleven sets of teeth with pleasure as he took up the tachyon source, reached out with his mind, envisioned once again the blue-green sphere of Earth . . .

Sean Mulligan felt dizzy — after only six pints? — and closed his eyes for an instant. When he opened them again, Portakal looked out.

"Sean, me old darlin'," Patsy Kelly said, "sure and you're not dozing off in the middle of the afternoon, sure and you're not?"

Sean blinked blurrily in his direction across the sea of pints, smacked his lips, and said, "Biru nihong, kudusai."

"None of that now," Seamus said, shaking an admonitory finger as thick as another man's wrist, for he was a great oak of a man hardstrengthened by a life on the building sites, "none of that. You know that I am ill-educated and don't have the Irish, so none of your stout-fueled priest-trained attempts at superiority."

Portakal rustled around in the synapses of the alcohol-dulled brain he now possessed. Oh foolish error, he was speaking Japanese, not the local language. What did they speak here? Yes, here it was. He sighed as he sank into the linguistic pool, spashed about with the correct words — then spoke. He would explain his earlier mistake so this body would not be stake-burned like the other.

"I am Portakal from a distant world across the Galaxy. I bring you greetings."

"Jayzus, he's pissed already," Patsy Kelly said with some amazement. "He's been into the whiskey at home, that's what he has been doing."

"You will obey my orders and will speak as I order you to if you value your drinking companion's continued existence."

He was dimly aware of pain on posterior and extremities as he struck the hard surface.

"And don't come back until you're sober," Noel called after him. "Shameful a man of your age, not to say education, in his cups this hour of the day."

The pub door closed, and Portakal pulled himself up from among the tattered crisppackets, fagends, and dogturds. He cursed, in Japanese because that came easiest at the moment. What kind of people were these that didn't know the difference between host and occupier? Disgraceful. Perhaps it was only the occupants of the saki-parlor who thought that

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way, for he knew that strong drink did strange things to these soft bodies. He would seek one of superior intelligence to converse with.

With slow pace he went along the street, using his newfound skills to spell out the words that swarmed on all sides. A glass window, THE JOLLY FRYER — FISH AND CHIPS, a locked door below, CLOSED FOR LUNCH. Interesting.

Another establishment, a signboard. PUNCTURES REPAIRED. On the other side it read PUNTURES REPAIRED. He made a mental note of the unusual spelling variations.

Then a larger building, made of dressed stone, set back from the road, coming to a point on top, door opened invitingly into the dark interior. He entered, saw rows of flickering flames; a man all in dark approached.

"I salute you, son of a distant world," Portakal said, "and bring you greetings from the other side of the Galaxy."

Father Flynn glowered along the length of his impressive nose. "Drinking again, Sean Mulligan, the curse of the Irish it is. And you not to Mass since the Battle of the Boyne. You'll die unshriven, man, you will plunge straight through the bottom of purgatory and into hell before you even know you're dead . . ."

"I bid silence and order attention," Portakal said testily. It had been far better in Japan. "My name is Portakal. You cannot see the sun of my planet from here, yet I assure you . . ."

"The only assurances I want from you, you blackguard, is a confession of your sins — long overdue. You are the burden that your poor wife must bear, the shame of her coming alone here on Sunday . . ."

"Will you listen to me?"

"I will not! But I will pray for you, miserable sinner that you are."

This was unbearable, unbelievable. Portakal turned the body on its heel and stamped out into the spring sunshine again. But the sun had vanished suddenly and chill rain came down, drenching him in an instant. He shivered and paid it no heed. There was obviously something wrong with these people. They could not all be hard of hearing. Perhaps he had picked the wrong host for his operations. He slumped against the wall and looked at those who hurried by in the driving rain. Could he make the effort of will to leave this host and find another? He had never done it before. He could only try. He waited until there was a knot of people close by, then willed it. Strongly . . .

Nothing happened. He would have to make the most of it. This creature would have to do. He would return to the first place of drinking and attempt communication again.

Yet when he ordered the body forward, it did not move. Impossible! His was the will that had spanned light-years, the strength that manipulated tachyons. This miserable earthling — he was aware of it lurking un-

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happily in a far corner of the cerebellum — could not fight against his strength of purpose. Then why couldn't he move? He spoke aloud, the only way he could communicate with the subject mind.

"Desist — I order it. We will return to The Arches."

"We will go to the center of regional government," he said in a deep and resonant voice.

Portakal was astonished. Those were not his words — or even those of his host. Then what . . .?

"Who are you?" he shouted. "I see you there, lurking in a twisted whorl of the medulla oblongata; step forward and present yourself."

An old woman stumbled by, clinging to her umbrella. Took one look at Sean Mulligan, crossed herself, and tottered even faster.

"I am Mnktl of the ^..>, oh Earthman, I bring you greetings from beyond the stars . . ."

"Get out of this brain," Portakal ordered. "I was here first."

Sean's eyes crossed as each of the aliens controlled one eye to look at the other.

"It cannot be true," Mntkl wailed in stentorian tones. "My mentor grew old and died teaching me the astral projection technique. I have expanded all of my energy to occupy this mind. You must leave."

"Tough-titty," Portakal growled. "Finders keepers, losers weepers. Now crawl away, alien sod, because I have important linguistic research to do."

Sean Mulligan danced in circles, limbs flopping, as the two alien presences battled for control, then splashed down into a puddle.

"I care not a pisple for your research," Mntkl thundered. "Mine is a dying world, beset by accelerated entropy. Our fuel is running out. I am here on a galactic rescue mission. I must talk to the authorities, offer them scientific knowledge in exchange for atomic fuel. Unless a cargo of U-235 is shipped out to us soonest, we go down the galactic plug hole."

"Good-bye" Portakal sneered unfeelingly. "No one has ever heard of your backward planet in any case — so no one will miss it."

Sean's voice cracked with rage as Mntkl snarled his answer. Then he gargled incoherently as both aliens struggled for verbal control. As this mental battle raged, Sean found that he could see dimly, as through a heavy fog, and when he tried to walk he began to stumble forward. In their urge to speak, the alien presences had abandoned control of his body. With shuffling feet he turned in a circle — there would be no welcome at The Arches today! — and started toward Mulrooney's. Walking slowly, talking to himself with high-pitched squeals and rattling gurgles, through the door and to the bar.

"That's a wicked cough you have

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there," Mulrooney said, setting one before him. "It's that Martello Tower and all the dampness. Put in the central heating, that's what you must do, though I see difficulties in drilling through the granite walls surely twenty feet thick."

Sean raised the pint slowly, then half-drained it. Talking all the time, quite splashily as the stout gurgled past his vocal chords.

Mulrooney went off to serve another customer as Mntkl spoke in dark tones. "A compromise, then, give me leave to speak. You would not wish the death of a planet upon your conscience, would you?"

"I have no conscience. Most impractical at the great pressures under which we live."

"Then I appeal to your intelligence — and curiosity. Merely let me go to the national dictator or other qualified government official and make my arrangements for the U-235. That creature will undoubtedly speak the local language better than our host, so your studies will quicken."

"What's in it for me?" Portakal asked, intrigued.

"The gratitude of an entire world."

"With that and a strtzl, I can buy a krtzl. You do better than that."

"I have nothing else to offer."

"What about your own language? Might be interesting. How would you say 'Breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I will Yes'?"

"N* /py ## **.*89."

"Forget it. That's not a language, it's a throat disease."

While they talked, Sean raised a shaky finger to Mulrooney, fumbled pound notes to the sticky bar, downed the fresh pint, and reached for an even fresher one.

"You are so unjust," Mntkl whimpered, "and selfish. Would you have an entire world die because of your neglect?"

"Damn right," Portakal responded dimly. "Galaxies like grains of sands, stars like dust — or holes in a blanket. Couldn't care less . . ."

His voice trickled away — then returned with an effort. "I find it almost impossible to talk — what's happening?"

"I'll tell you what is happening," Mntkl answered, his fear forcing the words through the cloying blanket of incomprehension. "While we have been distracted, this host-creature has been purchasing large amounts of biological poison. The deadly liquid has seeped into the synapses of his brain and is disconnecting them one by one. I am losing control. It will drive us out!"

"It will kill itself at the same time," Portakal squeaked. "We must stop it."

They each took one arm and clamped the hands tight upon the bar. Stared glassily ahead as they battled for control.

"So you've stopped talking to your-

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self at last," Mulrooney said, carefully polishing a glass. "Drunk yourself sober you have. Would you like one for the road?"

"I want," Mntkl said deeply, "no more," squeaked Portakal.

"Your voice changing? Not at your age. Must be your cold. Better get into bed before it turns into the flux."

Legs spread wide, hands clamped to the bar, Sean stood there breathing like a locomotive. His alien occupiers would stop him from buying more drink — but could not stop the gallons of Guinness in his gut from seeping through into his blood. Drop by drop the ethyl alcohol oozed until his plasma could have been bottled and sold for gin. His eyes bulged with the battle for control.

A battle lost. There was a tiny scream, vanishing into nothingness, accompanied by a small popping sound as Mntkl's grip slipped and his thought patterns vanished back among the stars. Portakal, the more experienced, fought on. But it was a losing battle, a defeat, an alcoholic Armageddon. As the synapses snapped open, he slipped away, vanished cursing, back to his gunkatmosphered home among the stars.

"Ahh," Sean said, letting go of the bar and rubbing his sore hands one against the other. Experience counted. The amount of alcohol he had consumed would have killed a teetotaler in twelve seconds, would have preserved intact an entire family of Hooded Rats in a glass jar for centuries. But years of alcoholic overkill had won. What matter that his liver looked as though an entire regiment of the Irish Guards had marched over it with hobnailed boots? It was of little importance that millions of his brain cells had been dissolved into jelly so that his IQ had dropped by twenty points. None of this mattered. What did count was that the aliens had been repulsed and he had won. He drew himself up and for the first time in hours spoke with his own voice, through vocal cords tired by the alien battle.

"It's quite a thirst I have. A pint, if you please."

"Good man. You had me worried there for a while."

"Had me worried as well, I assure you." He blinked away the alcoholic haze. "My mind was taken over, it was, possessed by first one strange creature and then another. That's it, by Jaysuz, that's what happened to me. I've been occupied."

"You've been drunk," Mulrooney said, putting the darkpint down.

"I've been both — but no one will believe me." He sighed and drank. "There were the two of them. One nasty one, thick as two planks. Wouldn't listen to the other's pleading that his whole planet would be destroyed. Laughed, he did. Nasty, pressurized little bugger."

"Sounds like a science fiction story to me. Why don't you write it

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down before you forget it? Sell it to someone."

"Not me. I'll leave the storytelling to the lads who don't drink. A sober, teetotaling, serious lot those science fiction writers, I hear. Set them up again, Mulrooney, and one for yourself this time, for I'm beginning to disbelieve what happened myself."

At this moment, as the pint filled full, far across the Galaxy a solid creature brooded unhappily at the bottom of a thickening sea, while still farther away entropy ran out and a dim star vanished with a tiny stellar scream.

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In which a man named Joe Nicholson goes to a bar in search of fantasies that are both ordinary and elusive, and is offered a choice that will change his life forever . . .

Point Zero

BY

TERENCE M. GREEN

What I don't understand, thought Joe Nicholson as he watched the stripper cavort about on the stage, is where all these girls come from. I mean — they're beautiful! Why would a girl, any girl — especially one like this, this . . . Tess Truebottom —want to do this? She's gorgeous!

Joe Nicholson was truly baffled. Baffled, but not sad. Baffled but enjoying himself. His befuddlement made enlightenment seem a potential scourge. He brought his beer mug to his full lips, tipped it lustily, and let the cool, now flat brew drain fulfillingly down his gullet. He stifled a belch, causing him an extended blink, thus missing Tess Truebottom's latest contortion wherein she displayed charms that might have stopped Joe's modest ticker. It was probably for the best.

The music grated and filled the room. It was throbbingly unavoidable, pulsing, vibrating, cauterizingly electric. Tess's superb frame swayed to it, her breasts sheened with a vital aura of perspiration, her long legs twisting and extending. Joe was rapt.

Tess Truebottom, the object of Joe's fascination, could not have been more than nineteen years old. This fascinated Joe too: her youth. The girls in the bars he frequented while on the road were always young — and always quite attractive. Was the money that good? Was the thrill that large? Or were there deeper, less obvious motives? For a trice, Joe imagined deprived childhoods, failure in school, and the absence of a stern yet benevolent father in their lives. It would account for much, he knew.

But the real question, Joe knew, was not what *they* were doing here, but what *he* was doing here. Yes, he

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mused. Yes. What *am* I doing here?

At that precise moment of introspection, Tess placed her hands on her sleek thighs, leaned forward, and gyrated her dark, long-spun hair in sensuous circles, letting it float web-like in alternating movements against the blur of spotlights behind her. And at that precise moment, Joe was certain that she was looking at him. Right at him. At *him*.

It was uncanny. Yet he never doubted for a moment that he was right. This was no deranged instant of megalomania, no subconscious guilt surfacing unbridled. Tess knew what he had been thinking, had always known it. It merely required the convergence of setting, people, and his inner musings, this unique synchronicity of cool intellect and latent passion, to coalesce the moment into an epiphany.

The music stopped. Tess remained frozen, her dark eyes still locked with his. Joe's mouth went dry; swallowing was difficult. There was a smattering of uninterested applause, and she straightened — still joined with him in a private communion — her body lush and superb, donning the red satin robe that had been lying on the stool at the rear of the small stage. Taped music, softer, less raucous, filtered from the speakers to either side of her. Joe watched her knot the sash at her slim waist. She smiled at him, lips crimson as her robe, a vision of promise seen through the haze of blue smoke that hung low in lazy curls throughout the bar.

She knew. Everything about him. He was certain.

A cigarette appeared between her lips. In response, a male hand surfaced from the darkness and the haze, and a tiny flame flickered. Tess leaned forward, inhaled deeply. The tip glowed, then calmed, and she was gazing at him once more. The deferent hand receded into the gloom. Conversations resumed in low drones; the bar life continued.

But not for Joe Nicholson.

She was coming right for him.

From across the room, like a heat-seeking missile, Tess glided purposefully, her robe rippling like a scarlet pond beneath a summer wind. It was happening. She was coming. To him. Why?

She stood before him at arm's length, smiling. Only a few curious heads turned to see the company she had chosen. Joe did not inspire much in the way of salacious conjecture, so even these few, unrewarded by anything piquant in the man she confronted, easily returned to the rhythms of drink, conversation, and rock music. Smoke rings unfurled above the layer of vaporous blue that slid unctuously about the room.

"It's time," she said.

Joe Nicholson was speechless. Her words flowed around him like sap oozing from a tall willow tree. His jaw dropped and his eyes were as round as brass buttons.

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She sat down on the chair opposite him, leaning forward on her elbows. Joe's eyes tried to pierce the smoke to see the silken smoothness of her breasts, bunched together where the robe parted nonchalantly. The cigarette listed from her dangling, ruby-tipped fingers, a tendril of smoke weaving from it like a serpent sliding out of a fakir's basket. When she smiled again, he saw her tongue, and his heart raced frantically.

"For what?" he asked.

"It's *your* time."

He didn't know what to say. The tune on the tape machine ended and was replaced smoothly. He recognized its beat and wail: The Stones; "You Can't Always Get What You Want."

Joe smiled to himself.

"But you can, you know."

Joe frowned. "Can what?"

"Get what you want." She took a deep drag on the cigarette.

He let himself smile outwardly now — if apprehensively. "And what," he asked, "do I want?"

She exhaled slowly, the smoke issuing from some source deeper than within her. "It's not simple," she said. "It never is. Never."

He paused for a while, letting his eyes glide over her centerfold features, then returning to her dark, bottomless eyes. "Are we talking about the same thing?" he asked.

"Yes and no."

"Ah." He nodded. The last beer in his mug was flat. He drank it anyway.

She waited until he had finished, then put her hand on his wrist. At her touch, his head filled with visions, an overwhelming, bottomless chasm of images, memories, dreams, of things undone, times forgotten, people ignored, of hatred and anger and guilt and resentment and aching and yearning and hoping, of roads never taken, moments not pursued, opportunities lost. There was a sensation of being buffeted by waves, of being washed up on a shore in a land where the sky was slate gray and the beach saffron and ocher. For long moments he lay there, facedown in the sand, drenched by the salt sea that swelled up from unnameable depths, and gasped for breath. When he finally drew it in, sucked in the precious air and swelled his lungs with life, he found himself gazing into the black eyes of Tess Truebottom. They were still seated in the smoke-filled room.

"You see," she said, her cool fingers still touching his arm. "I told you it was never simple."

"Who are you?" He didn't recognize his own voice.

"Tess Truebottom. Stripper *extraordinaire*. My name a marquee staple."

He groped for what to ask next. Nothing seemed to fit. "No. Really. Who?"

She shrugged. Even this simple movement was rife with sensuality. The sheen of the robe glistened and slithered over flesh as white as ivory. "You were asking yourself that very

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question before I even noticed you. In fact, it was partly because you asked that question that I did notice you. You wanted to know where girls come from who perform for you in bars."

Joe couldn't talk. This was too much. He didn't know whether to run or to order a fresh beer. He did neither. He continued to sit and stare at Tess, defueled by a rare combination of awe, curiosity, skepticism, and lust. In the background the Stones' tune was reaching a ribald crescendo.

"And the other reason I noticed you is that I've seen you before."

"But I've never been here before."

"Oh, but you have." Her dark eyes flashed brazenly. She crossed her long legs, and he caught his breath.

"I haven't been in Cleveland for years. And I've certainly never been here before. Yesterday I was in Akron; two days before that, Dayton. Nearly all my work is in Cincinnati. But when I do travel, it's nearly always south — Louisville, Lexington, Nashville. . . . It must be five years since I've gotten this far north. . . ."

"I want you to meet somebody."

"Who?"

"You'll know him."

"What are you talking about? Meet who when?"

She placed her long, cool fingers on his wrist once again, tripping his pulse into a less sane rhythm. "Now. Come with me."

"Why?" It was the last word of resistance he could muster.

She stared into the depths of his churning eyes. "Because," she said, "it's your time. It's point zero."

Seizing his fingers in hers, she led him, like a puppy on a leash, across the smoke-filled room, weaving in and out between round wooden tables with peeling veneers, their tops besotted by wet rings from the bottoms of stale beer mugs. Peanut shells crunched underfoot. The Stones broke in with "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." They were heading, he saw, to a table in the far corner. In the dim lighting he could discern a man's shape seated there: a charcoal silhouette against a gray backdrop.

Tess Truebottom stopped at the table and led him around to her side. He stared at the man seated there.

It was him.

In the dingy corner of the Honeybunch Club, in Cleveland, Ohio, Joe Nicholson, hand in hand with Tess Truebottom, stood and stared down at himself.

There was nothing he could think of to say. It was surreal — the whole thing.

It *was* him. It was definitely ***him***. There was no question of a hoax, of a look-alike — these ideas scarcely touched his mind before being instantly discarded. He knew on the basis of more than mere looks; he *felt* the truth.

"This is point zero," said Tess.

He looked at her, then back at

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himself, and still said nothing. I should feel something profound, he thought. I should feel terror, or awe, or outrage. But I feel nothing. Well, he admitted to himself, *almost* nothing. I'm still curious. I still don't understand. But this is real. I feel *that*. He sat down, and a couple of seconds later, immediately across from him, Tess sat down too. Her white teeth flashed in the darkness, and she seemed, in a way he could not fathom, more desirable than ever.

He put out his hand to shake the hand of the man who was himself. The stranger clasped it firmly, and he recognized the grip.

"You are me, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes and no."

"Ah." He nodded. He wished he had a beer.

"Tell me about yourself," he heard the stranger with his voice ask.

"What's to tell? I'd think you'd know everything."

"I don't, though. I met Tess only three days ago. I know we're quite different, you and I, just from talking with her."

Joe glanced at her, wanted her, hated her, needed her. The carnelian robe was hypnotic and lush — a cardinal landscape of rich hues and wanton grottoes.

"I'm Joe Nicholson."

The man across from him nodded.

"I live in Cincinnati. I'm forty-three years old. I sell B. F. Goodrich tires to auto dealers and private outlets from Nashville to Toledo. I'm divorced." He paused. "I make a good living." He couldn't think of anything else. "I drive a Dodge Charger," he found himself adding, surprising himself slightly. He paused again. "Tell me about yourself."

The stranger smiled — a mixture of compassion and whimsy. "I'm Joe Nicholson."

Joe had known this — had expected it. But the words, the sound of his voice, nevertheless sent a tingle throughout his body, and he felt, momentarily, cold. He was suddenly acutely aware of the possibility that he might faint, sensing the room listing uncomfortably and hearing the stranger's words clatter in his skull. It's the alcohol, he thought. No, it's not the alcohol.

He wished, in fact, that he had another beer — even the watered-down brew that he'd inured himself to for the past hour or so. I want her too, he thought, turning his gaze to the mysterious Circe who had lured him onto these shoals. His desire for her filled an inordinate portion of his consciousness, all things considered.

The Stones rolled another oldie through the bar's mammoth speakers: "Good Times, Bad Times."

The stranger continued. "I'm forty-three years old. I live in Buffalo. I'm married with three children. I'm a circulation manager for the *Buffalo News*. I make a very good living. I," he

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added, "drive a Dodge Charger too."

Joe's eyesbrows rose at this tidbit. "Why are you in Cleveland?" he asked. "Better yet, why are you at the Honeybunch Club?"

"Ask Tess."

Joe glanced at her. "How long have you been at this club?"

"Six months."

"What were you doing in Buffalo three days ago?"

"Same thing I'm doing here. Stripping."

"How could you be there and here?"

Tess moved her dark eyes from one to the other of them, then back. "You, of all people, need to ask that? Now?"

"I'm not sure I get it."

"I'm Tess Truebottom in more than one beer joint. You thought you'd seen girls just like me before. Well, you have. You've probably seen me."

"What's going on?"

"This is your time. It's point zero."

"You keep saying that! Give me a straight answer. What's going on?"

"Think of me as an . . . agent. I bring people together to make choices. There's a perfect time for each of us to redeem the biggest error in choice we've ever made. That time is point zero. Nearly everyone gets their chance at it. This is your chance." She looked straight at him. In a manner he couldn't fully comprehend, she was looking straight through him as well.

"Is he real?" Joe nodded toward the stranger in the corner — the stranger who was himself.

Tess leaned forward enticingly. "Are *you* real?" he couldn't, he noticed absently, see anything reflected in her eyes. She then slouched back, the robe parting seductively between her perfect breasts. "He's as real as you are — *if you want him to be.*"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you like your life?"

"Yes. No. Sometimes."

"That's not very clear."

"Mostly it's the pits."

"Does his life sound better?" She indicated with only a glance the stranger in the corner.

Joe stared at him too. "I don't know."

"I've got a good wife, three healthy children, a steady job. I'm not on the road all the time. I get to stay in one place," said Joe Nicholson of Buffalo, New York.

"And I could be you — somehow. Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Why should I? What's the advantage?"

"Do you like traveling? Do you like being divorced?"

"Yes and no."

"Do you like hanging out in places like . . . like . . . the Honeybunch?"

Joe from Cincinnati, Ohio, shrugged noncommittally. "Where do you hang out?" he asked.

"I stay home — with my family."

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"And watch 'Magnum' and 'Knot's Landing' on Thursday nights?"

"You said your life was mostly the pits."

He shrugged again. "Yeah."

"So you can improve your lot. Tess can do it for you."

"And what's in it for you? That's the stumper. What do you get out of it? Do you get to be me? Is that it?"

"No."

"Well, what is it, then? What happens to you?"

Tess's voice insinuated itself. "It's more complicated than that."

"Yeah. Yeah. I remember. You said nothing was ever simple."

"You see. You *do* listen." She smiled playfully, and he saw her tongue again. His heart skipped a beat.

"Clarify this for me, will you, Tess? I mean, lay all the cards on the table."

"O.K. All the cards on the table." She pursed her full, rubescent lips together, then began. "You know the phrase, 'There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries'?"

"Yeah. The Bible, right?"

"Shakespeare."

"Same difference. Get on with it."

The tide is full for you right now, Joe Nicholson. As I said, this is *your* time. We call it point zero."

"Who's 'we'?"

"The Tess Truebottoms everywhere."

"What are you? What's a Tess Truebottom?"

"I'm a stripper. I dance, I gyrate, I take it all off. I'm your fantasy. I'm every man's fantasy — even the ones who won't come through that door. You're just more honest. You want me. Every man wants me. I make them want me because I'm in the business of making men want me. I give them the dreams they try to bury, but that will never go away. I exist because you created me, Joe Nicholson. You, and every man alive. I exist like a fever, deep down in your lust-ridden imaginations. I will always exist there. I cannot be exorcised. You want my thighs, my lips, my complete lack of inhibitions. You *want* me. You made me. I exist as the possibility you will always seek, as the possibility that all men seek. We exist in a symbiotic relationship. Think of me that way. We're in the business of providing possibilities. It's what we do. In many ways. *Many* ways, Joe. You left your wife — how many years ago? . . . ten? eleven? — because there were no more possibilities for you with her. And your life was, as you said, the pits. You can have *his* life now. Your other possibility. It's your time. Point zero."

Joe was breathing heavily now, his mind racing with her words. "And him," he said. "What happens to him?"

"It's *his* time too! There're an infinite number of you, Joe, just as there are of me and everybody else!

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Back in Buffalo, at the Blue Ladybug, Joe Nicholson, who has never married and who is self-employed — who owns his own real estate appraisal business in Toronto — is waiting for you to say the word, and you become him," she said, indicating Joe Nicholson of Buffalo. "And he becomes Joe Nicholson of Toronto, now sitting in the Blue Ladybug, who in turn becomes Joe Nicholson of New York City, who's waiting with Tess Truebottom in the Satin Slipper in Scranton, Pennsylvania. It spreads like a wave, on and on, and everyone gets another chance, because your time has come. The tide is at the full!"

"Why do I sense that I'm somehow a key in all this?"

"Because," she said, "you're the point of departure. No one wants to become you. You represent the least desirable version of what you could have become — the bottom rung on an infinite ladder. It all hinges on you — on your recognizing the opportunity for another chance. If you don't agree, then" — she shrugged — "stasis continues. The moment is lost. Your time is gone."

"Tonight is point zero. This is it. It must be tonight," said Joe Nicholson of Buffalo, "or we all lose our chance." His knuckles were white. "*All* of us."

The Stones were singing "2120 South Michigan Avenue." Joe shuffled his feet in the peanut shells. God, he thought, how I want a beer. Then he glanced at Tess. And how I want her, he thought.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't think so."

"But you said your life was the pits," said Buffalo Joe in a voice turned shrill. "You can change all that!"

"It might be the pits. But it's my life. I understand it." He looked at Tess. "Nothing's simple, right?" he smiled.

Her dark eyes flashed and she returned his smile.

The stranger in the corner leaned farther forward, his eyes increasingly haunted. "You can't let an opportunity like this pass. I own a house! It's paid for! I have twenty thousand in bonds in a safety deposit box in Buffalo — just waiting for you! My wife is beautiful — my children, a father's dream!"

"Then why do you want to change? I don't get it."

"Because I can have *more*. I've met Joe Nicholson of Toronto — his life is infinitely richer, infinitely more varied — and he feels the same way about Joe Nicholson of New York City, who's vastly wealthy and successful. We *all* do better. Don't you see? It's to *all* our advantages!"

"And I'm the least desirable, eh?"

Nobody said anything.

"And if I become you, then I disappear, and, presto, *you're* the least desirable version of me again, only I'm it again! I'm the bottom rung again! I'm not so sure my lot does improve."

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Joe Nicholson of Buffalo was flustered. He was also becoming angry, and it showed in the way his face flushed and his eyes narrowed. Cincinnati Joe had seen it many times in the mirrors of motel rooms throughout the Midwest, usually after discovering that one of his customers had switched to Michelin.

"Follow me," Tess said suddenly, rising from the table. She turned and headed through an obscure hall about ten feet away. Both men rose, unable not to follow.

She halted halfway down the grimy hall toward the dressing room area and pressed the release bar on the emergency exit door to her right. Without hesitating, she passed outside, into the night. They followed.

They were in a service alley at the club's rear. It had all the trappings one would expect: garbage cans and plastic bags piled high, litter underfoot, the odor of beer and hamburgers. Above, though, the moon was full and bright, and the stars glittered brilliantly. The alley was cast in silver and black. Tess's red satin gown shimmered and whispered, drawing them to her. She glanced up at the round whiteness of the moon.

"Hurry, she said. "There's not much time."

"I'm not interested," said Cincinnati Joe.

"You don't know what you're saying!" He recoiled at the sound of his own voice turned ugly from the stranger's mouth.

"It has to be here, now," she said.

"No."

"For God's sake, why not?"

"I don't like you. I like me. I think it's highly debatable who's the bottom rung around here."

"Think of the money you could have—"

"I think you're a scumbag. A pig. You make me sick."

Even in the wan light, he saw the stranger's teeth glint whitely as he bared them. Then he saw the hand disappear beneath the jacket and emerge a second later clutching the .22. Before he had time to react, before he even had time to voice a protest, even a bleat of resistance, the barrel flashed a horrible apricot color and the explosion and impact seemed simultaneous. He tried to draw a breath, but could not, tried to remain standing, but his legs would not respond. He felt himself falling backward, felt himself hit the pile of plastic garbage bags and slide to the floor of the alley, amid the french fries and the crushed Styrofoam cups. He saw his own face, a crimson sash, a swirl of stars, his mother's face. Then he died, his mouth still open.

Tess Truebottom gazed at Buffalo Joe Nicholson, at the small pistol he brandished so insanely, and needed to ask nothing. His eyes, gleaming wildly, met hers. "Now," he said, "I'm the bottom rung. I'm the key. It all hinges on *me*. And I consent to it. I *want* the change. Do it! Do it now!"

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She glanced up at the black sky, at a sliver of cloud that had crept across the cold brightness of the moon. "I can't," she said.

He stared, speechless. His face trembled terribly, then his hand. "Why?" he asked. His voice was barely a whisper; his eyes had dilated.

"The time is past."

He couldn't talk.

"It's gone," she said. "Point zero is gone. Your time has gone. It can't be retrieved."

"What are you saying?"

"It's over. The tide has ebbed." She paused, staring into the hell behind his eyes.

"You toyed with us." His voice was throaty, shaking.

She shrugged, then shook her head.

A flower of white-orange flame blossomed from the small pistol for the second time in less than a minute, and the report echoed hollowly between the damp brick walls. Between the milk-white breasts of Tess Truebottom, a bright vermilion stain appeared.

But she did not fall.

Buffalo Joe Nicholson's eyes widened in shock and horror and fascination as he realized that she was not going to fall. Instead, she shuddered, and the shudder caused the flesh to fall away from the perfect features of her face, and underneath, Joe Nicholson saw the face of his father; and in a passage of time as long as it was short, the face of his father peeled away, like lettuce leaves wilting in the heat, and he gazed numbly upon the face of his mother. From his mother's mouth, he heard the words again, in Tess's voice: "I exist as the possibility you will always seek. I cannot be exorcised. I give people dreams they try to bury, but that will never go away."

As he watched, his mouth agape, the flesh of his mother's face sloughed itself off in great, hideous flakes, and he was staring at the bleached skull underneath. Only then did the husk of Tess Truebottom slither to the dank pavement beneath.

At the black Velvet Club in Madison, Wisconsin, Harry Levy watched the stripper cavort about on the stage. He was experiencing a moment of rare curiosity, blended with the not-so-rare pounding of his blood. He knew he'd never figure it. Why would a girl do this? he wondered. And where did these beautiful girls come from? I mean, he thought, they're gorgeous!

From the loudspeakers came the wailing of the Stones: "Time Is on My Side." Harry sipped his beer.

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THE MINOR OBJECTS

I was having lunch with an editor at a diner in my neighborhood last month, and the manager approached and said that he hated to interrupt us but there was a gentleman who wanted to be introduced to me. I sighed, looked at my companion a bit nervously (I always have the feeling that I may be suspected of having arranged such matters in order to make an impression) and said, "Well, bring him here."

Up came a man of middle size, rather thin, with dark eyes, a prominent Adam's apple, a shirt open at the collar, and a day's growth of beard. I did not stand up, for among the few privileges of advancing years is that of keeping one's seat when a younger man would feel compelled to rise. After all, as the knee-joints ripen, the wisdom of not loading them with unnecessary labor is evident to all.

I placed a pleasant smile on my face and said, "Hello," to the newcomer, who said to me earnestly, "Dr. Asimov, my name is Murray Abraham, and I want to tell you that your book on Shakespeare —"

That's as far as he got, for *now* I rose to my feet, and with explosive energy, too.

I said, with the utmost conviction, "You are *not* Murray Abraham. You are Antonio Salieri!"

After that, the conversation was simply chaos. I wouldn't listen to him

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tell me about my books. I wanted to tell him about his performance in the motion picture "Amadeus," and since I was older than he was, I suppose he felt it a necessary courtesy to let me have my way, finally. I never found out what he wanted to say about my book on Shakespeare.

It was like this, you see. I very rarely go to a motion picture theater, chiefly because I am too busy at my typewriter or word processor. (You'd be surprised how being a prolific writer eats into your time.) I did, however, seize the occasion to see "Amadeus."

I watched with awe as F. Murray Abraham (whom I had never seen before) played the difficult role of the partly villainous, partly pathetic Salieri. About halfway through the picture, I turned to my dear wife, Janet, and said, "That guy, Abraham, is going to win an Academy Award for this."

I hadn't seen any of the competition, but I was quite certain that no other motion picture role that year could possibly come up to Abraham's. I knew perfection when I saw it.

Of course, Abraham *did* win the Academy Award, and I have never enjoyed such a victory more. I considered it as much a tribute to my own judgment as to Abraham.

That's why I was so excited when I met him, and that's why I denied his name. Now and forever after, he may be F. Murray Abraham to himself, but he is Antonio Salieri to me.

And as I meditated on the difficulty of distinguishing between an actor and his role, a chain of thought led me to the matter of distinguishing between a comet and an asteroid. So here goes —

If we're going to distinguish between the two great classes of minor bodies of the Solar system, let's begin by defining each.

Asteroids are a swarm of small bodies that circle the Sun between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. Some of them are fairly large, and one of them, Ceres (see WORLD: CERES, September 1972), is about 1000 kilometers in diameter. There are several dozen asteroids with diameters of over 100 kilometers, but the bulk of the possibly 100,000 asteroids that may exist are small objects, no more than a few kilometers across.

A second swarm of minor objects (see STEPPING STONES TO THE STARS, October 1960) is thought to circle the Sun at a much greater distance. Whereas the asteroids orbit the Sun at a distance of about 400 million kilometers, the second swarm may lie as far as one or two light-

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years away, and so are some 35,000 times as far from the Sun as the asteroids are. Let's call the bodies of this far-off second swarm "cometoids." (This term is my own invention and is not used by astronomers, as far as I know.)

Naturally, no astronomer has ever studied, or even seen, any of the cometoids circling the Sun in this far-off region. The cometoids out there are too distant and too small to be detected in any way. Their existence can only be inferred from the existence of comets and from the close study of cometary orbits, structure and behavior. That's why I call the bodies of the hypothesized distant swarm cometoids, as a back-formation from "comet."

Cometoids and asteroids are both relatively small, solid bodies in orbit about the Sun, but not only are the former much farther from the center of the Solar system, they are thought to be much more numerous as well. I have seen estimates to the effect that there may be as many as 100 billion cometoids, or about a million cometoids for every asteroid.

Differences in distance and number are, however, trivial. If that is all the difference there were, an individual cometoid or asteroid set side by side might be indistinguishable.

There is, however, an important difference in chemical structure that depends directly on the difference in distance.

Both cometoids and asteroids were presumably formed when the solar system, in general, was taking shape. What's more, they were formed from the same vast cloud of dust and gas from which the Sun and the planets were formed. Astronomers are pretty certain this cloud was made up chiefly of hydrogen and helium, with an admixture of such other atoms as carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, neon, argon, silicon and iron (see CHEMISTRY OF THE VOID, January 1986).

Hydrogen, helium, nitrogen, oxygen, neon, and argon are gases that do not easily solidify even at great distance from the Sun. Hydrogen combines with oxygen, however, to form water, with nitrogen to form ammonia, and with carbon to form methane. These substances all freeze into solids that, in appearance, resemble ordinary ice (that is, frozen water), and so they are lumped together as "ices."

The remaining elements, making up somewhat less than half a percent of the total, collect into metals and rocky substances.

Out of this and other considerations, the American astronomer Fred Lawrence Whipple (1906-) advanced the notion, in 1950, that cometoids are "dirty snowballs"; large lumps of ice (chiefly water-ice)

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with stony and metallic particles distributed as dust and as occasional larger pieces. It is even conceivable that some cometoids might have a solid rock-and-metal core.

Some calculations would make it appear that a cometoid is two-thirds ice in mass, and one-third rock and metal.

Cometoids are dirty snowballs, however, only because they have formed far from a Sun that was coming into being even as the cometoids themselves were being shaped. The young Sun poured heat in every direction and had a strong solar wind, too. The heat vaporized those substances most easily vaporized and the solar wind swept those vapors outward and away. Large objects such as Jupiter and Saturn could hold on to any vapors produced, thanks to their enormous gravitational field, but anything the size of minor bodies such as the cometoids couldn't. They couldn't hold on to hydrogen, helium and neon, which remained vapors even under the feeble heat of the distant Sun. They *could*, however, hold on to those substances which solidified into ice at the low temperature of the distant reaches of space.

If minor bodies formed *near* the Sun, however, as, for instance, in the asteroid belt, the results would be different.

The asteroids, forming in the comparative neighborhood of the Sun, would be sufficiently affected by the heat of the Sun for all the ice that might have formed to have eventually turned to vapor. In fact, the heat would be such that the ice might not collect in the first place. All this vapor would then be swept away by the Solar wind and driven into the far reaches of the Solar system, where it might then contribute to the formation of the cometoids.

The asteroids, therefore, are formed almost entirely out of the rocky and metallic bits left over. It is this paucity of building material that may make the asteroids so much fewer than the cometoids and, on the whole, somewhat smaller, too.

To make a distinction, then, that is not trivial, asteroids are built up of rock or metal or a mixture of the two, with ice present in minor quantities or not at all. Cometoids are built up of ice, chiefly, with rock and metal forming a minor impurity.

An astronomer, viewing a small body at equal telescopic distance, could label it a cometoid or an asteroid according to its manner of reflecting light. An ice cometoid would reflect a much larger percentage of any light falling upon it than a rocky or metallic asteroid would.

Then, too, because of this difference in chemical composition,some-

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thing happens to cometoids that never happens to asteroids.

Every once in a while, the distant cometoids are perturbed in their majectic multi-million-year-orbit about the Sun. There might occasionally be a collision between two cometoids that would transfer energy from one to another, slowing the former and speeding the latter. Or else the gravitational pulls of the nearer stars might, depending on the position of the stars, slow or speed a cometoid.

A cometoid that gains energy and speed moves farther from the Sun and may eventually be lost to the Sun forever, and take up a virtually endless pathway through interstellar space. A cometoid that loses energy and speed moves nearer the Sun, and perhaps penetrates the regions in which the large planets exist.

The gravitational effect of the outer planets on a cometoid wandering through their neighborhood may force that cometoid into a radically new orbit — one that brings it into the near vicinity of the Sun at one end. Planetary influences may even trap it (or "tame" it) to the point where it remains within the planetary portion of the Solar system through its entire orbit. It then becomes a "short-term" comet. Instead of circling the Sun in millions of years, it circles it in no more than a century or so — or even less.

Cometoids do not long survive their close approaches to the Sun, or at least not long in astronomical terms. Whether cometoids undergo an increase in energy and move away from the Sun forever, or whether they lose energy and pass on to eventual destruction in the Solar neighborhood, they are lost to the cometoid belt. It is estimated, however, that in the entire 4.5 billion years that the Solar system has existed, only about one-fifth of the cometoid horde has been lost. By far the greater part remains.

Let's concentrate, now, on the cometoids that approach the Sun. When they do so for the first time, they are exposed to the Sun's heat as they never were when they were at home in the far-off swarm. As the cometoid is heated, the ice evaporates and the dust particles of rock and metal are freed. The gravitational pull of the cometoid is too weak to keep those dust particles firmly bound to the surface, and the upward movement of vapor carries the particles along. The vapor and dust form a kind of atmosphere surrounding the cometoid, and the dust particles glitter in the sun. The cometoid, as it approaches the Sun, thus develops a hazily luminous "coma." The coma is swept back by the Solar wind into a "tail."

The coma and tail grow larger and brighter as the cometoid ap-

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proaches the Sun, until, if the cometoid is large enough and approaches Earth closely enough in its passage, it becomes a magnificent sight, with the tail arching a long distance across the sky. It is only in this form that we can easily see and study a cometoid. The hazy, tailed object into which a cometoid is converted is called a "comet." This is from the Greek word for "hair," because the tail, to the imaginative Greeks, resembled the long unbound hair of a person, streaming backward as the comet moved across the sky.

The distinction between a *comet* (rather than a cometoid) and an asteroid is child's play.

An asteroid is just a luminous dot in the sky, even when seen by the best telescope. It looks just like a star (hence the name "asteroid," meaning "star-like) but is distinguished from stars by the fact that it moves against the background of the true stars.

A comet, however, is a larger object, hazy in appearance and irregular in shape. The closest comets have long tails and are bright enough to be seen by the unaided eyes. Even small and distant comets, which can only be seen telescopically, will show a haze unless they're very far from the Sun.

And yet there is another difference between the two. Whereas an asteroid is a permanent object, a comet ages rapidly, and the distinction between the *old* comet and an asteroid can be blurred.

Every time a comet skids about the Sun, a considerable quantity of its substance is vaporized and swept away — and never returns. Each time the comet passes the Sun, then, it is smaller than the time before, and, eventually, it may vanish entirely.

Astronomers have watched this happen. The most celebrated case is that of Comet Biela, so-called because its orbit was first worked out in 1826 by an Austrian amateur astronomer, Wilhem von Biela (1782-1856). The comet had a small orbit and reached "perihelion" (its nearest approach to the Sun) every 6.6 years. It was observed in 1846, when it was found to have lost enough material to produce a split. Instead of one comet, two appeared. In 1852, the double comet appeared again, the two fragments widely separated and the smaller fragment very faint.

After that, Comet Biela was never seen again. Apparently, it had been totally vaporized — or, to put it more dramatically, it had died. Other such splittings and disappearances have been seen since.

But cometary deaths may occur in different ways. That of Comet

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Biela, death by total evaporation, is most spectacular, but a comet can also die a quieter and much more prolonged death.

Some comets may well contain more solid dust mixed with their ice than others do, and the dust may be distributed unevenly. Portions of the cometary surface that are particularly dusty would vaporize more slowly than those portions where the ice is purer. For that reason the cometary surface may melt away in such a fashion as to form plateaus of dusty areas interspersed by valleys where dust-poor areas have evaporated. Occasionally dust-rich plateaus may be undercut and collapse, exposing fresh surface to evaporation and causing a sudden temporary brightening of the comet. (Such brightenings are frequently observed.)

Such collapses help spread dust over the surface generally. In addition, some dust which is liberated by ice-evaporation and which lifts off the surface, may drift back as the comet recedes from the Sun. The dust is much more likely to do this than the ice vapors will.

As a comet ages, then, its surface gets more dusty. The dust eventually builds up into a thick layer that hides and insulates the ice from solar heating, so that an old comet forms very little haze and no tail.

The best example of an old comet is Comet Encke, so-called because its orbit was first computed, in 1819, by a German astronomer, Johann Franz Encke (1791-1865). Comet Encke has the smallest orbit of any known comet and the shortest period. It reaches perihelion every 3.3 years. It has been closely observed dozens of times, and each time it liberates a faint haze — one that is just enough to identify the object as a comet.

Under such circumstances, a comet can last a long time, as it dribbles away its buried ice from under its protective layer of compacted dust. In the early stages, of course, a particularly thin portion of dust-cover may burst from the pressures of heated ice beneath, and a gout of vapor and dust may emerge from the newly-exposed ice. This, too, would cause cometary brightening. However, Comet Encke is past that stage.

Even an old comet must eventually give up all its ice, or at least reduce the dribble of vapor to so small a quantity that it can no longer be observed. It may even be that some comets may have small cores of rock and metal that persist after the ice is totally gone.

How, then, do you tell a *dead* comet (whether it has well-hidden ice or none at all) from an asteroid?

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One difference that remains is the nature of the orbit. Almost all asteroids have orbits that are entirely between those of Mars and Jupiter. What's more, those orbits are not very eccentric or very far inclined to the "ecliptic" (that is, to the plane of the Earth's orbit).

Cometary orbits, on the other hand, are characteristically very eccentric and commonly have a high inclination to the ecliptic.

If, then, we were to discover asteroids with orbits that show high eccentricity and inclinations, we might wonder whether we really have an asteroid — or a dead comet.

There are such suspect asteroids with orbits that bring them close to the Sun periodically, so that they have perihelia that are nearer the Sun than the planet Venus is. These are "Apollo-objects" (see UPDATING THE ASTEROIDS, August 1974), and, of them, the most spectacular, until recently, has been Icarus, an asteroid discovered in 1948 by the German-American astronomer Walter Baade (1893-1960). It was the 1566th asteroid to have its orbit determined, so it is officially known as "1566 Icarus."

At its perihelion, Icarus is only 28.5 million kilometers from the Sun. The planet Mercury at perihelion is 45.9 kilometers from the Sun, so that Icarus reaches a distance from the Sun only 3/5 that of Mercury's best mark. The asteroid has been aptly named, then, after the character in Greek mythology who flew with his father on home-made wings. Icarus, in his arrogance, flew too near the Sun, so that the wax holding the feathers of his wings to the wooden framework melted. Off came the feathers and down fell Icarus to his death.

At its "aphelion," or point of farthest distance from the Sun, Icarus is at a distance of 300 million kilometers, well within the asteroid belt. Its eccentricity (the measure of the elongation of its orbit) is 0.827, the highest known for an asteroid. Its inclination is also quite large, being 23.0 degrees. It isn't too unreasonable, therefore, to wonder if Icarus might be a dead comet.

Then, on October 11, 1983, the "Infra-Red Astronomical Satellite" (IRAS) detected an asteroid with an unusually rapid apparent motion against the stars. (This rapid motion at once showed it to be near Earth and made it seem, very likely, that it was an Apollo-object.)

The asteroid was first called 1983 TB, according to a system used to identify asteroid sightings. The IRAS sighting didn't give much information about the asteroid, but it gave enough to allow it to be tracked down by ordinary telescopes. Its orbit was then worked out. Since it

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was the 3,200th asteroid to have its orbit determined, it might be called "Asteroid 3200." (Just about as many new orbits have been worked out since 1948, you'll notice, as in all the years before 1948 — something that must be attributed to the coming of computers.)

The remarkable thing about Asteroid 3200 is that at perihelion it is closer to the Sun even than Icarus. The perihelion distance of Asteroid 3200 is 21 million kilometers: only 3/4 that of Icarus, less than half that of Mercury, and 1/7 that of Earth. The asteroid was promptly named Phaethon, after a character in Greek mythology who was the son of the Sun-god, and who persuaded his father to let him take the reins of the solar chariot for a day. With Phaethon's unskillful hands at the reins, the solar horses careened madly across the heaven. Lest he destroy the Earth, Zeus struck Phaethon dead with a thunderbolt. Phaethon clearly approached the Sun even more closely than Icarus did in the myths — and in astronomy.

At aphelion, "3200 Phaethon," as it should now be called, is about 385 million kilometers from the Sun, considerably farther out than is true of Icarus. With Phaethon's perihelion closer, and its aphelion farther than is the case for Icarus, you can see that Phaethon's orbit is even more elongated than that of Icarus, and its eccentricity is higher. Phaethon's eccentricity is 0.890, a new high for an asteroid. In inclination, Phaethon is 22 degrees compared to Icarus's 23. Phaethon returns to perihelion every 1.43 years (522 days, while Icarus does so every 1.12 years (490 days).

Well, then, is Phaethon a dead comet?

When Phaethon was first observed by ordinary telescope, it was quite far away and receding. Astronomers watched for its next approach to see if, under the most favorable conditions, a dribble of vapor and dust could be seen. In December 1984, it passed near Earth, and no trace of coma could be seen. In fact, it looked like a stony asteroid, so that if it were a dead comet, it was a *very* dead comet.

Does any way remain of making a distinction between a completely dead comet and an asteroid that was never a comet at all? Oddly enough, there is — after a fashion.

As comets age, the dust that is liberated as part of the coma and tail continues to move about the Sun in the cometary orbit. Little by little, for a variety of reasons, the dust particles are distributed throughout the orbit, though a heavier concentration may remain, for a period of time at least, in the neighborhood of the comet, or in the place where it

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used to be if it has died by total evaporation.

Every once in a while, the Earth, in its orbit, cuts across such a dust swarm and the particles heat and vaporize in the atmosphere, forming meteoric streaks at a greater rate than is customary on ordinary nights. Once in a long while, in fact, Earth cuts across a heavy concentration of such particles, and the result resembles the falling of luminous snowflakes (though none survive to reach the ground). There was such a major meteor shower over the eastern United States on the night of November 12, 1833, and this incident began the serious study of meteoritics.

There are a number of such "meteor streams," as they are now called. Their orbits have been worked out and are found to be comet-like in character. Sometimes the particular comet that is associated with them is alive and can be identified. One meteor stream has been found to follow the orbit of vanished Comet Biela, and when its particles enter Earth's atmosphere, they are called "Bielids," in consequence.

If an Apollo-object is a dead comet, might it not be possible that a meteor stream occupies its orbit? It would seem so unless the comet has been dead too long, for, with time, the dust particles are gathered in by the planets and satellites they pass, or are dispersed through space in some fashion.

As it happens, most Apollo-objects have not yet been found to be accompanied by meteor streams, although two of them, 2101 Adonis and 2201 Olijato, have orbits that are at least close to the known orbits of two such streams.

Fred Whipple pointed out, however, that Phaethon's orbit is very close to that of a well-known meteor stream known as the "Geminids." The orbits are so nearly identical that it is difficult to suppose it to be coincidence only. Therefore, if any of the Apollo-objects is really a dead comet, Phaethon is.

As in the case of all Apollo-objects, the question arises as to whether Phaethon might ever strike the Earth. If so, it would be a horrible catastrophe, for Phaethon is estimated to be nearly five kilometers in diameter. Fortunately, Phaethon crosses the ecliptic at a point well inside Earth's orbit so that it remains several million kilometers away at even its closest point to Earth.

However, the gravitational pulls on Phaethon on the part of the various planets combine to move the point of crossing the ecliptic farther from the Sun. If this continues, then according to some calcula-

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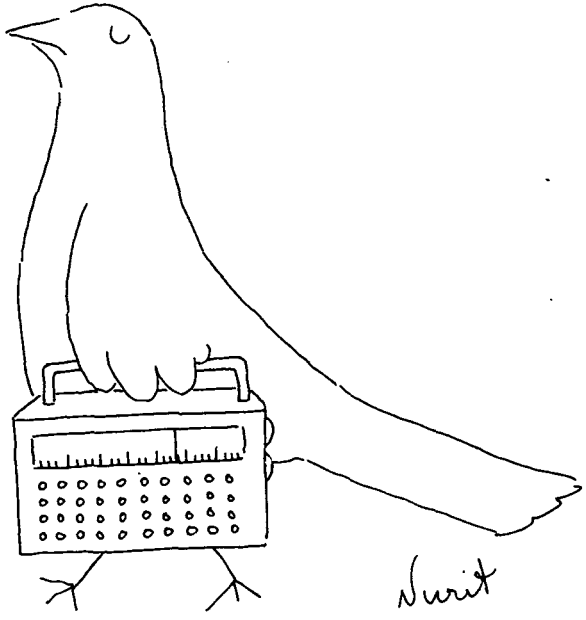
tions, in 250 years the orbits will actually intersect and there would then be a small chance that both Earth and Phaethon would arrive at the intersection point simultaneously before that point moved still farther outward and made collision impossible again.

On the other hand, as Phaethon makes closer and closer approaches to Earth, Earth's gravity will send it into a new orbit, one probably less dangerous to Earth. An actual collision is *most* unlikely.



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Bradley Denton wrote "The Summer We Saw Diana," (August 1985). His latest story concerns the survivor of a tragic automobile crash, whose life has slipped into a different and quite chilling gear . . .

In the Fullness of Time

BY
BRADLEY DENTON

Darrell (1)

The slowness begins as the pickup truck's headlight beams jump onto a boxcar. His right foot tries to stab the pedal, but his muscles are too sluggish. It's as if the air has turned to gelatin.

He's been driving too fast. The brakes lock too late.

But he had to get Kaye home on time, didn't he?

Alien sound envelops him as the truck fishtails. The tires groan like dying animals, and Kaye's gasp is like air filling a huge bellows.

Kaye. He forces his head to turn toward her and sees that her face, illuminated by the pale green glow from the dashboard, is twisting into an expression of fear.

He tries to say that it's all right, that he loves her, but he can't open his mouth far enough.

Another boxcar is in their path now. It's the one they'll hit. On Kaye's side.

Darrell is aware of everything, of the train, of Kaye's breath, of the weirdness of the light. The brake pedal thrums against his foot. The pickup's springs compress. There is a stink of black rubber and asphalt.

He sees, hears, feels, and smells it all. And he can do nothing about it.

They shouldn't have gone to a party so far out in the country, so far away from the house where Mrs. Phillips watches the passage of every minute on the living room clock. He shouldn't have had the last three beers. He shouldn't have let time get away.

Not after what Kaye's gone through

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for him. You're only seventeen, the others are always telling her. He's twenty-two. And what kind of support could he give you driving a soft-drink truck. What about college plans? He looks at her frightened eyes and tries again to say he loves her. But the sound of grinding, tearing metal fills the world.

The side of the boxcar looms beside Kaye's head. Darrell sees rough speckles of paint just before the window explodes.

Green-glittering cubes shoot through the cab in a slow spray. Darrell sees Kaye try to turn, sees her mouth open, sees the particles bury themselves in her cheeks and eyes.

The roof comes down.

Nine-tenths of a second have passed since the headlights shone onto the train.

Frank (1)

He calls Lori to say he'll be home late. It's a heavy Friday night in the E/R, much heavier than usual for a town of eleven thousand like El Dorado, much heavier than usual for the whole country, and he thinks he should help.

He works on a cardiac case (stupid — the guy took up jogging tonight at age fifty-four without getting a stress test), a kid who got his nose broken in a fight, and assorted other cut, bumped, and bruised people. *Spring must be the season for racking yourself up,* Frank thinks.

It slacks off around one, and he waves to the two EMTs and the nurse to let them know he's leaving.

But two ambulances scream up outside, and the drivers bring in new patients. Looks bad; a tremendous amount of red . . .

Frank goes to the first one, pulls off the sheet, and shudders. He and one of the EMTs work on the girl, but it's useless. He can't help thinking that he might as well stay around to do the autopsy, since Jack Simmons, the alcoholic county coroner, will probably ask him to do it anyway.

He glances over and sees the second victim's face.

It's his brother.

Oh, God, Black Sheep, what've you done now?

He feels a numbness in his solar plexus that he's never known before, but he banishes it by trying to save the girl.

Eventually he has to give up.

Darrell (2)

He hears low, booming things, like voices from a record album playing at half-speed.

". . . you . . . awake?" one of the voices asks. "This . . . is . . . Frank . . ."

It doesn't sound like Frank. Frank doesn't talk as if he were submerged in molasses.

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Darrell opens his eyes and is surprised at how long it takes.

One of the three men standing over him in this white room is indeed Big Brother . . .

. . . who made Mom and Dad proud before they died in the plane crash. Who married a girl his own age, from his own high school class. Who went to med school and made something of himself.

"Hello, Goody-Two-Shoes," Darrell tries to say. But instead of his voice, he hears another low, booming thing.

". . . accident . . . last . . . night . . ." Frank says. ". . . fractured tibia . . . lacerations . . . concussion . . ."

Darrell's temples throb. He doesn't think he can stand to hear warped voices much longer, but he has to find out—

What he already knows.

"Kaye," he says. In speaking that one syllable, he sounds almost normal. Frank's colleagues turn away with incredible sluggishness and drift out the doorway that's several feet beyond the end of the hospital bed. Frank's face creases, and his eyelids half-close.

". . . didn't . . . make it . . ." the molasses-voice says.

Darrell listens to blood forcing its way through the vessels in his head. It's a sound like the ocean, or a gargantuan washing machine.

"I want to see her," he tries to make his tongue and lips say.

". . . burial . . . tonight . . ." Frank says. "Mrs. Phillips . . . didn't want . . . embalming . . . Kansas law . . . twenty-four hours . . ."

The slowness of the words is horrible. Darrell begins to close his eyes. If only no one will talk to him, he'll be all right. The hospital stench is sickening, but at least it isn't time-warped like everything else.

He doesn't get his eyes completely closed before he sees a crying woman float into the room.

It is Kaye's mother, clutching a Bible in her left hand. She raises her right arm and points at Darrell.

"MUR . . . DER . . . ER . . ."

The word hangs like smoke.

"BURN . . . IN . . . HELL . . ."

She goes on and on, and Darrell can understand only part of what she says. But it's enough:

Kaye was only six weeks away from graduating, and then she'd have gone to college. She would have been safe. But now — now —

If her father were alive, he'd get his gun and —

Frank takes the woman's left arm. Darrell sees the fingers of her right hand curl and is surprised that Frank can't dodge quickly enough to avoid the nails that strike his cheek.

The other men return and grasp the woman's shoulders. Her wail resonates in Darrell's jaw.

The three doctors take Mrs. Phillips out of the room.

They walk as ghosts through water.

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Frank (2)

He checks his brother's pulse, blood pressure, and respiration, then frowns and writes in the green spiral notepad he bought at the drugstore this morning.

In the past four days, he's gone through all the literature that could possibly be relevant, done blood tests, reflex tests, and even a CAT scan. All indicate that Darrell's obvious injuries are his only physical wounds.

Whatever else is wrong, then, is beyond Frank's power to heal.

At least there'll be no legal trouble. The crossing was unlit and its markers knocked down by vandals, and Darrell was doing only four miles per hour over the speed limit. The blood tests for THC and other illegal drugs were negative, and the alcohol level was below that of legal intoxication.

(Frank wonders about this, though he tries not to. The tests were done so long after the wreck . . .)

Still, just because the law won't prosecute doesn't mean that his patient hasn't put *himself* on trial.

He pats Darrell's arm and goes out to the nurses' station.

There he makes a phone call to a friend in Wichita, a friend who owes him favors. A psychiatrist.

He feels like a failure. A traitor.

Like Goody-Two-Shoes.

• • •

Darrell (3)

Raindrops drift down like elongated glass beads in clear syrup. He almost smiles as he watches them disintegrate against the sidewalk.

Then he raises his eyes. The old place looks too perfect. Frank and Lori have painted it blue and planted shrubs and flowers to mask the concrete-block foundation. Darrell wonders if they've even landscaped the family cemetery on the back twenty.

Frank holds his crutches and helps him out of the car. *A slow ballet for cripples,* Darrell thinks.

"Good . . . country . . . air," Frank says.

Darrell wishes Frank wouldn't talk to him without using the three-speed tape recorder. It's to hard to make sense out of the grotesquely stretched words.

But then, he knows Frank bought the recorder only to humor him. Big Brother thinks the problem is mental. He's even hired a shrink, a med school buddy named Andrew Barnes.

The shrink says Darrell is punishing himself.

"Accidents . . . happen . . ." Barnes said at the hospital, refusing to use the recorder. "Yet you . . . take blame . . . delude . . . yourself . . . You . . . move . . . speak . . . essentially . . .normally . . . must . . . forgive . . . yourself.

"Accidents happen," Right. A

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sweet, beautiful 103-pound woman has been crushed by a ton of metal.

"Forgive yourself." But even if he does, Kaye's friends and family never will. Frank didn't let him attend the memorial service a week after the burial, saying it was "too soon" to get out of bed, but Darrell knows the real reason. He couldn't go because he would have been the Murderer. Murderers don't go to their victims' funerals.

"In . . . the . . . fullness of . . . time," Barnes has said, "they . . . will . . . forgive . . ."

How long will that take? Darrell wonders. And how long will it *seem* to take?

He counts off seconds as he hobbles up the sidewalk behind Frank, reaching 250 before they stand on the front porch. The sidewalk is fifteen yards long.

The year in the hospital, Frank has told him, took two weeks. The two months he's to spend here will probably seem like a decade, because the slowness is getting worse.

It takes three hours, in Darrell's time, for him and his things to be moved into the little room on the first floor. This was his bedroom when he was a teenager, after Frank left for college, and his narrow bed, chipped maple bureau, and oak nightstand are still here. But the paisley wallpaper has been replaced by neat wallboard painted a light blue. There's also a new rag rug, speckled with bright colors. He wonders if Lori made it herself.

Frank leaves him alone "for a few seconds," so he counts the rug's colors and memorizes the position of every speckle.

Has his body slowed down, or has his mind sped up? Or have both slowed down, but at different rates?

As he sits motionless on the edge of the bed, it occurs to him that he feels normal for the first time since the accident. He's alone with no moving object to serve as a frame of reference, so his thoughts seem to progress at their proper rate. But he must remain still . . .

Only the dead can be still forever.

He begins to wonder how much time is really passing and sees that there's no clock in here. Probably an intentional omission on Frank's part.

After what seems like an hour, Frank's ten-year-old son Paul enters the room. Skinny and freckled, the boy reminds Darrell too much of what he himself was like as a kid. The resemblance is especially striking now that Darrell has time to note every blemish and scrape. The big scab on Paul's left forearm duplicates an injury Darrell had at the same age as the result of a nasty bike wreck.

He studies Paul's face and sees the hero worship he's always seen there, now mingled with worry and fear. What must it be like to worship someone and then have your God despised by almost everyone else?

Paul touches the plaster encasing

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his uncle's right shin and calf. Darrell winces even though he feels nothing.

"No . . . basketball?" Paul asks in a voice as deep and slow as a whale's.

"'Fraid not," Darrell tries to say. His jaw aches, and he tells himself he must be imagining it. There can be no pain, for Frank and the psychiatrist insist that he speaks "essentially normally." It's only in his guilty mind that his voice has slowed.

Ah, but dear brother and dear shrink, what does "essentially" mean in doctorese?

Frank returns and tells Paul to change clothes. At least that's what Darrell thinks he says. The boy leaves.

Frank has the bulky three-speed tape recorder with him. He sets it on the floor, moves the speed switch from the first position to the second, and pushes the PLAY button. The reels seem to stare at Darrell like crazy brown eyes.

"I don't like using this," the machine says, "but I will now since Lori wants to go into town for Chinese food. We usually eat out on Saturday evening." The voice is still too slow to be Frank's, but at least it's understandable. "I know they fed you before I came up, so do you want to come, or will you be all right by yourself?"

Even in the stretched syllables, Darrel can hear what Frank hopes the answer will be. Lori was one of Kaye's teachers, and she must not want Darrell to come along, must not even want him in the house. Frank is trying to be Perfect Husband and Big Brother at the same time.

Goody-Two-Shoes, Darrell thinks as he watches Frank's finger come down on the STOP button.

"I'll be fine," he forces out. It takes ten minutes.

Frank nods in a gradual sinking of chin toward chest, then holds out a small brown bottle. The word Lorazepam stands out in typed capitals on the prescription label. This stuff was the shrink's idea.

"Frank says . . . you aren't . . . sleeping . . ." Barnes said when he wrote the prescription. ". . . too much . . . anxiety . . ."

But Darrell hasn't been taking it. Frank doles out the pills and, trusting soul that he is, never checks to see if his brother is actually swallowing them.

Frank shakes out a pentagon-shaped tablet and puts it on the nightstand. Then he replaces the bottle in his pocket and takes a stethoscope and sphygmomanometer from the bureau's top drawer.

To Darrell's mind, the brief check on his vital signs takes about an hour and a half. When it's over he tries say "Really slowing up, aren't I?"

The muscle in Frank's neck ripples as he shakes his head. Then he pushes the PLAY button again.

"You say the same thing every time," the machine says, "so here's my all-purpose answer: Even if your

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pulse and respiration were slower than they used to be, and I'm not saying they are, it'd be the result of biofeedback. Like Andy says, once you stop punishing yourself, everything'll be back . . . to . . . normal."

The last few words are so low and drawn-out that Darrell has to guess at what they are from the context of the words that have come before. He wishes Frank would use the high-speed setting.

As his brother leaves the room, Darrell sighs. The sound is like the rumble of a freight train.

He thinks of how Kaye looked just before she died.

The little white pentagon on the nightstand gleams at him. He knows why Frank keeps the bottle, but it doesn't matter. In the pocket of a pair of jeans in his suitcase is a plastic cylinder he took from a trash can at the hospital. When he adds this latest pill, he'll have ten altogether.

Frank's wife, Lori, glides past the open doorway with the baby, Jennifer, in her arms. Her posture suggests that she's hurrying, and she doesn't look in at him. But Darrell can read the message etched in her profile. She wants him gone. She hates him, as does everyone who knows he killed Kaye. Except Frank and Paul, who are trapped by blood.

Barnes doesn't hate him either, but that doesn't count. A shrink is trained not to hate paying patients no matter what they've done. Darrell wonders how much he'd have to pay the rest of the world to make them feel the same way.

He doesn't blame Lori. But he can't go back to his third-floor walk-up or to driving the Pepsi truck until his leg heals, can he? And until the slowness stops . . .

Paul returns with an armload of books almost as big as he is, and after a subjective hour Darrell understands that these are books Frank thinks might help pass the time. Darrell tries to say "thank you" and doesn't know if the words come out right or not. The boy gives him a long hug and then dashes out, running on the moon. Darrell's throat feels tight.

Much later, Frank appears in the doorway and indicates that he and his family are leaving. Is Darrell sure he'll be all right?

Darrell manages a nod.

Long after Frank, Lori, and the kids have gone, the tearless heaving hits him. But it isn't as bad as it was during the sleepless, week-long nights in the hospital. It lasts only a few hours.

When it's over, Darrell concentrates on his movement and is able to pick up the crutches and rise from the bed. Eventually he makes it into the hall and turns toward the living room.

By the time he reaches the edge of Lori's new dove-gray carpet, he feels winded and sore. His breath is a rasp.

If he squints, the reddish lamplight

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shows him the hands of the clock that's part of the waterfall painting on the far wall. It's 7 P.M. He's been back in his boyhood home for twenty minutes.

Strangely, returning to his room doesn't seem to take as long as the trip out did. Maybe, he thinks as he sinks down to the bed, Frank and the shrink are right. He'll never be rid of the pain, but if he can learn to live with it—

The stack of books is beside the bed, and the jacket of the one on top catches his eye. It looks like a slam-bang thriller similar to the ones he read in this room as a kid. He picks it up, trying to ignore the slowness of his muscles, and opens it to the first chapter.

He's gotten through less than half a sentence when he realizes the true extent of the change. He can read single words or even pairs of words with no difficulty, but when he tries to move his eyes to the next pair—

It's so painfully slow that the concentration required to move his eyes obliterates his comprehension of what he's just read. He spends what feels like four hours reading thirty words he can't remember. His head aches.

He can't watch television; he tried in the hospital, and all he saw were snowy flickers. He can't talk, can't listen, can't read — can't do anything but sit and think. And when he does that, he thinks of the wreck, of Kaye's death.

He drops the book, then rises and again makes the trek to the living room. It takes twice as long to reach the edge of the carpet as it did the first time. The aluminum crutches groan.

He stares across the room at the waterfall painting, tells himself he can't be sure of what he sees in the dim light, and ventures out farther. The crutches leave deep round wells behind him. It's like crossing a desert of gray sand, and it takes forever.

When his face is only a few inches from the face of the clock, he holds his breath until he can hear the steady hum of the mechanism.

Then he begins breathing again, and the sound is deeper and slower than ever.

It's two minutes past seven.

Frank (3)

There's only one Chinese restaurant in El Dorado, and there are no empty tables when they arrive. They have to wait in a recessed area to the right of the entrance, imprisoned behind velvet ropes.

Frank feels as though he's standing under a lens that's focusing the sun to a burning point.

"They're talking about us," Lori mutters. "Mary Webb and her husband. Terry Tucker and somebody I don't know."

Paul looks up with a puzzled ex-

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pression. "What, Mom?"

Frank shifts the baby's weight from his right arm to his left. "She wasn't talking to you, kiddo." He tries to sound jocular and fails.

The waiter finally comes for them, and as Frank walks between the tables he feels as though he's running a gauntlet. Sure, Darrell used to be a little wild — drank too much beer, drag raced down Central — but do they think he killed the Phillips girl on purpose?

". . . heard the boy driving was stoned . . ." a woman whispers to her companion as Frank passes beside their table.

That's a lie! he wants to shout, and holds it in throughout the entire meal.

If only they could see Darrell, or the green notepad, maybe they wouldn't—

He breaks open a fortune cookie. Of course they would. Prejudice is stronger than pity.

His fortune says, YOU WILL PROSPER WHILE OTHERS FAIL.

He waits for Lori to finish so they can leave.

Once they're in the parking lot, he feels better despite Lori's anger. At least they can go home now and spend a few hours away from other people.

As he takes the car keys from his pocket, he sees a young redheaded male leaning against their station wagon.

"Oh, no," Lori whispers.

"Who is it?" Frank asks in a low voice, slowing his pace. His keys jut up between his knuckles.

"His name's Tad Johnson. He was in my comp class last quarter. He . . . sat beside Kaye Phillips. I heard him ask her out several times. She always said no . . ."

The teenager stands up and gestures at Frank. "You Dr. Butler?" he says loudly. "Darrell Butler's brother?"

"That's me. Excuse me; I have to get to my car." Frank shoulders past Tad Johnson and inserts the key in the lock. Lori takes the kids around to the other side.

"I got a question," the teenager says.

Something churns in Frank's abdomen. He gets in the car and reaches across to unlock the passenger door.

Johnson leans over and glares through the closed window. "Did you let Kaye Phillips die so you could save your piece of shit brother?"

Numbness crawls up Frank's chest into his neck and brain.

Is that what they think?

The rearview mirror reflects his son scrambling across the back seat.

"You shut up!" the child screams.

The teenager's face presses against the glass. "Rumor says you gave him the dope he was on. But the cops took your word he was straight, didn't they?"

Frank feels as if his head were encased in a block of ice. He starts the

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car's engine, guns it, and slams the transmission into gear.

Five miles down the road, he can still see an anonymous face pressed against the glass, accusing him, scorning him.

Because of Darrell. Because of his wild, hated brother.

He decides not to show the green notepad to another physician. He'll take care of his own blood.

Darrell (4)

The only trees in the back twenty are inside the cemetery fence. He touches the bark of the big cottonwood and remembers the platform he built in it when he was thirteen. It didn't last long; his mother made him take down the boards, saying it wasn't respectful to build a tree house where the dead were resting.

Darrell stands with Andrew Barnes before the single grave where his parents are buried. It's the only one of the thirty-five on the quarter acre that's still built up in a slight mound. The others are all flat, recognizable as graves only because of the headstones. Tiny blue spiderwort blossoms are everywhere. Kaye liked wildflowers . . .

A week ago — actually this morning — Barnes took him to the cemetery where's she's buried. He wishes he'd had some of the spiderwort, because the groundskeeper had long since removed the other mourners' flowers, leaving a bare dirt mound that didn't even have a headstone yet. The only marker was a metal plate with removable letters, and her name was spelled wrong.

He decides to take a few wildflowers back to the house. Uprooted spiderwort tends to die quickly, but to him it'll seem to last a long time. He begins to stoop down, and it takes so long that he almost changes his mind. But at last he comes up with fifteen or twenty blossoms and looks at them closely, trying to distinguish the purplish grains of color on the petals from what must be a white background.

An hour or two later, he becomes aware of Barnes pulling on his arm.

He turns toward the psychiatrist and is struck by how out of place the other man looks. Barnes is short and nearly bald, with thick eyeglasses and a black mustache, and he's wearing a dark blue suit with a red tie. The shrink clashes with the meadow, the trees, the headstones, and especially the wildflowers.

For the first time in years, Darrell feels the urge to laugh. But when he gives in to it, he's immediately sorry; the sound is like a whooping foghorn.

Barnes takes the spiderwort and hands Darrell his crutches, and they begin the journey to the mile road where the psychiatrist's incongruous Lincoln sits like a monument.

As far as Darrell knows, shrinks

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don't usually make house calls, and they certainly don't spend Mondays driving their patients all over the countryside. Yet Barnes has been coming out to the old place twice a week for four weeks. He's being paid, but Darrell is sure he wouldn't be doing all this if it weren't for his friendship with Frank.

Just what is it about Big Brother that makes everybody want to do him favors? What was Frank born with that Darrell wasn't?

Frank is home when they reach the house, and he has Barnes stay for dinner. Darrell is glad of that, because meals are usually the worst parts of his days. His sense of taste seems unaffected by the slowness, but he has no appetite, and sitting at the table means being within the sphere of Lori's hatred. The psychiatrist's neutrality might make the hours of chewing and forced smiling more tolerable.

It doesn't happen the way Darrell envisions. Paul isn't at the table, and Lori stays only long enough to deposit the baby in her high chair and whisper something to Frank. Darrell guesses that he's meant to hear, but to him the whispering is only a series of long hisses.

Paul must be in trouble, he thinks, and for a few hours he tries to find confirmation in Frank's face. But Frank has a way of hiding concern that's especially effective now that his facial movements are so slow.

Darrell lets his fried chicken fall to his plate.

Big Brother and the shrink look at him strangely.

"Paauull," Darrell says. The vowel sound seems to fill the air for a full minute.

Low noises come from Frank's mouth.

Darrell pushes himself up from the table, grasps his crutches, and leaves. It'll take a while to find out what's wrong, but he has nothing but time.

When he reaches his room, he lies on the bed and reaches underneath to switch the tape recorder to slow-speed and starts it running on RECORD.

Frank and Barnes come in a few hours later, the shrink carrying Jennifer. Darrell closes his eyes and thinks of their voices as wind in distant trees. He's aware of Frank examining him, but he keeps his eyes closed.

Much later, after they've gone, he rewinds the tape and moves the speed switch to the third position. The voices are still too slow, but mostly understandable.

"I wonder if he even heard what we said." That was Barnes. "His delusion may have progressed to the point where he literally can't understand us. Perhaps—"

"No. he's not going to the State Hospital. They can't do anything for him that we can't."

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Rustling sounds; Frank getting out the stethoscope and sphygmomanometer. A rip of velcro. The baby whimpering.

"How's he doing? There, there, Jenny."

"Um . . . fine."

"You don't sound like you mean it, and you keep touching something in your pocket. What is it — a memo pad? Anything I should see?

"No. . . . Listen, talk to him, will you? I don't like the way he's just lying there. Trying to mimic a coma, I guess. Feel like my brother's a cadaver."

"I'll try — here, take your daughter, she's slobbering — but if he doesn't want to hear me, he won't. Darrell. A few days' expulsion isn't a punishment a boy Paul's age pays much attention to. Yes, he got into a fight, and yes, it was over you. But no real damage was done. If anything, this should serve as proof of your worth. Paul thinks the world of you. You don't want to close yourself off from him, do you?"

A long silence, broken only by a meaningless yelp from Jennifer.

Then Frank's voice again: "Andy, I can't help but wonder. . . . You think there's any chance the problem really could have a physiological basis?"

"No. Not unless you blew every test, which I find hard to believe. Look, most problems of the psyche have physical components. But which is the cause and which the effect? To the patient, there isn't always a difference. To us, there must be. Otherwise, we have no hope of curing."

"Yes, but —" Frank's voice stops abruptly and then starts over. "It's just that I keep remembering a car wreck I had in college. Went off a curve and down a flight of concrete steps. And it *did* seem as though time slowed down, just as Darrell describes it. I seemed to fall a hundred yards between each step."

"A trick of the mind," the shrink's voice says. "Sort of a temporary paralysis due to shock or fear, lasting only as long as the event. But Darrell connects that paralysis with what happened to the girl. He feels he must punish himself by remaining in the state he was in at the instant of her death. He'll stop when he realizes the pointlessness of that. Are you listening, Darrell?"

Another long silence.

"I don't think he needs a tranquilizer tonight, do you?" Frank's voice asks. "Like I said, he's doing a good imitation of a coma.."

"He's resting well enough, but not necessarily *too* well, as you imply. He's just tired — limping around on crutches all day will do that, you know."

The tape recorder replays the sounds of Frank's and Barnes's footsteps and of the closing door.

Darrell turns off the machine and lies still. With his eyes closed, he can see what must have happened to Paul.

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"Hey, how's it feel to have an uncle who kills people?"

Paul would smolder, and the next time, or the time after that—

"Looka this kid. Got killer blood. His dad does abortions, and his uncle murdered a girl. Heard she was pregnant, too. His unk's a *pregnant girl* murderer."

Paul would explode, flailing at the bigger kid's face, kicking, crying—

"He is not! He is NOT!"

Darrell's eyes sting.

Something touches his left forearm. He'd flinch, but his muscles are too slow.

When his eyes open, he sees his nephew's face through blurred air. The skin around the boy's right eye is purple, and the bruise extends down past the cheekbone. Paul's nose is so swollen that his freckles are invisible. His lower lip is split.

Darrell tries to say he's sorry.

Paul finds the tape recorder, switches it to slow-speed RECORD, and begins speaking into the microphone. Darrell watches him, wishing he could take the wounds upon his own face.

Paul is still talking when Lori appears in the doorway. Darrell feels hot beams stab into his brain.

After what must be a brief argument, Paul leaves. He pauses at the doorway, turns back, and raises a hand. Then Lori grasps his arm and pulls him out. The door shuts, and a hollow rumble makes the bed vibrate.

Darrell listens to the tape.

"Don't be mad at me like Mom and Dad, Uncle Darrell. I know I look bad, but you should see the other guy. He has a big fat lying mouth, and I closed it for him."

A long pause.

"You get well soon, and then we'll show them. I guess I'm gonna stay home tomorrow."

"Paul! You're to stay in your room until I tell you to come out, young man."

"I said I'm sorry. I feel bad for—"

"How do you think I'll feel when the other teachers ask me why my own son got into a fight at the grade school?"

"Tell them Jody Billings is a fat liar!"

"Get out of here!. Get away from that — that —"

In his mind, Darrell hears the word Lori couldn't say. He's heard it over and over since Kaye's mother said it at the hospital.

The sounds of small, angry footsteps come from the tape recorder.

"Uncle Darrell, I—"

"Come on!"

At this speed the rumble is more obviously the sound of the door being closed. Not slammed — Lori wouldn't allow herself that — but closed hard enough that the message is clear.

Darrell turns off the machine and thinks of the plastic prescription bottle on the floor between the wall and

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a leg of the nightstand. There are thirty-nine pills in it now. He wonders if that would be enough.

"Your unk couldn't stop killin', could he. But he got a busted leg when he murdered the girl, so he couldn't kill anyone else. Had to get himself. Least he won't kill more pregnant girls, huh?"

No. Even if the other kids left Paul alone, it would be wrong. Because if the boy ever had bad trouble, really bad trouble, and offed himself . . .

That death would be Darrell's fault, too.

He tries to think of other options and realizes that he has only one. To move away from El Dorado, maybe clear the hell out of the state. Then in a few years, after Paul has forgotten about him, he can do what he wants.

If only his leg would heal so he could get going. It's taking so goddamn long for the bone to knit . . . or does it just seem like it?

He broods for weeks and decides that he can't face the dry sobs, the convulsions, tonight. Just this once, he wants something he hasn't had much of for a long time: sleep. And he won't get it without one of the white pentagons.

It takes several minutes to retrieve the cylinder, but then getting a tablet is easy because he always leaves the cap lose. One pill teeters on the rim for a few moments before drifting down into his palm.

After swallowing it, he lies back and remembers the first time he and Kaye made love, out at the reservoir one night last July. They drove around for hours before finally stopping in a wooded area of the state park. Then they spread sleeping bags and blankets in the truck bed and slowly undressed each other in the dark heat.

Slowness was good then, was wonderful, delicious. If only its permanence had begun then instead of ten months later. Those ten months would have seemed a lifetime. A perfect lifetime.

He dreams of how it would have been.

Frank (4)

When his friend has gone, he writes down the latest findings. Then he looks at all the numbers he has so far and wonders if he should show the notepad to Barnes after all. And if it would make any difference. He doesn't think what's happening can be stopped.

Something inside Darrell is changing him beyond what even grief and guilt should be able to do, and the part of Frank that is a doctor wants to tell his colleagues about it whether they can help or not. But the part of him that is Darrell's brother . . .

He puts off the decision by going into his study to sort through the day's mail. Lori has already taken out the bills and junk mail, and what's left

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is a pile consisting of three brochures from pharmaceutical companies, a request for money from his alumni association, and a postcard from a vacationing friend.

There is also a second pile: four envelopes addressed to Darrell. A little better, Frank thinks; the day before yesterday there were six.

He opens the first. Inside is a single sheet of paper covered with huge block letters:

DIE YOU DRUG BASTURD SHE WAS WORTH 10000000000 OF YOU I HOPE YOU DROUN IN YOU'RE OWN PUS. IF I CATSH YOU OUTSIDE I WILL KILL YOU.

The other three were longer, and worse. The worst of all is the last one Frank opens. It is neatly typed, grammatically perfect, and contains no obscenities. It suggests that Darrell castrate himself with a piece of broken glass.

Frank tears them up. But more will come tomorrow. Tonight is the night Kaye Phillips would have graduated from high school.

The people of El Dorado wouldn't be satisfied if Darrell really did go into a coma. They want nothing less than his death.

After a few minutes of hesitation, Frank opens the telephone directory and copies several numbers into the green notepad. It's time to buy the things he'll need.

He isn't sure how he knows that. But he knows.

• • •

Darrell (5)

He raises himself up on one elbow, feeling as groggy as if he'd slept for several weeks. And to his mind, he has.

Frank is here, and he puts the tape recorder on the bed beside Darrell's left hand.

"It's good to see you sleep," the thick machine-voice says," but I'm going to have to wake you. Lori can't get a substitute because the seniors graduated last night, and some of them trashed her room. It's finals time for her juniors, so . . . you get the idea. And I've got five hospital patients I've got to see, plus appointments, so I can't stay home either. Jenny's day-care center won't take Paul, and we couldn't find anyone to sit with him. He's going to have to stay home.

"He's under strict orders not to leave the house or turn on the stove. But just in case anything should happen, dial number seven on the hall phone. That's preset to my paging service, and they'll beep me. O.K.?"

Darrell looks up at Frank. "O . . . ," he begins, and decides it isn't worth the effort.

Frank shuts off the tape recorder and checks Darrell's pulse. He frowns and seems about to reach for the tape recorder again, then leaves. Darrell watches him as he goes. Frank's wearing a dark brown three-piece suit and

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looks every inch the successful doctor.

Goody-Two-Shoes, Darrell thinks, and sits up. He's slept in his clothes and feels grubby. And slow. Frank seems to have been gone for six hours before Darrell's feet touch the floor.

Three sounds like the beats of distant timpani quiver in the air. Someone is knocking on the half-open door.

He's surprised to see that it's Lori. Frank caught a good-looking one, Darrell thinks as she glides toward him. Shoulder-length honey-blonde hair, hazel eyes . . . but she can't compare to the dark, quiet beauty that was Kaye. Nobody can.

Lori picks up the microphone, rewinds the tape, and begins recording. Darrell has nothing to do for a long time but watch her, and he doesn't have to understand her words to know what she's saying.

He feels as though he's baking.

Days later, she goes out without looking at him.

"I have nothing against you . . ." the message begins.

She despises him.

". . . but you're reckless. Please don't take this the wrong way. I hate leaving Paul here today, but I don't see any way around it. I'll be home as soon as I can. What I'm trying to say is that if anything happens . . . I'm holding you responsible."

Only fair, Darrell thinks.

"And I know your leg's a problem, but . . . could you please go back to your apartment? It'd be better for everybody. You, too; you need your independence."

Even as slowly as the words come out of the speaker, Darrell can tell that the last sentence was spoken as if Lori had been saying, "You need to stab yourself."

He rewinds and erases the tape. Tonight he'll tell Frank that he wants to move back to his own place tomorrow. The hell with the stairs. The twenty-four hours remaining in his stay should seem like only a month or so.

A day later, after the journey back from the bathroom, Darrell sits on the bed and stares at the powder-blue wall, thinking of how Kaye's hair curled below her ears.

Then Paul comes in. He's carrying a cassette recorder, but he uses the three-speed to tape a message.

The boy's face looks worse than it did yesterday. The lids of his left eye have swollen into purple half-moons.

When Paul finishes talking, he rewinds the tape and changes the speed selector switch. Then he presses the PLAY button and sits silently while Darrell listens.

"Mom told me not to bother you, but you won't tell, will you? I was in my room fooling around with my record player, and I got an idea. I don't know if it worked. If it didn't, you can throw away the tape. It's kinda neat being home without Mom and Dad, even if I do have to stay inside. We

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were s'posed to have an arithmetic test today, but Mrs. Clinton said she'd let me make it up if I didn't blab about it. I don't think she likes Jody either. . . . So I guess I better go now since Mom said I shouldn't come in here unless I was dying. This is your nephew Paul signing off. Roger wilco, over and out."

When the message ends, Darrell strains his facial muscles into a grin. Paul grins back, looking a little pathetic, then turns on the cassette player and bounces out of the room.

Darrell is surprised to hear recognizable music. It's still too slow, but the song is clearly an old Willie Nelson number. Paul has played a 33-1/3-RPM album at 45 or 78 and taped the result.

Darrell looks down at the Magic Markered letters on his cast: PAUL THE GREAT WAS HERE XXX. Next to the words is a drawing of a stick figure with a cape.

After listening to both sides of the tape, Darrell starts it again at the beginning. He wonders how he can begin to repay his nephew for the gift.

Then he realizes that the song he's listening to seems slower than it did the first time through. Some of the words are slurred. Maybe the batteries . . .

He finds an AC cord in a compartment on the back of the cassette player and plugs it into the socket beside the nightstand.

The music still sounds slower than ever.

Before the first side has played through for the second time, Darrell can't recognize the songs. He raises his head and is frightened at how long it takes.

His eyes focus on the jar on top of the bureau. The spiderwort he picked yesterday is dead.

Frank (5)

He has made his phone calls and written two checks, but the notepad in his jacket pocket still seems to generate enough heat to burn through to his heart. He knows he's not paying enough attention to his patients today, knows he's not being a good doctor. He hates it.

He wishes he knew what to do beyond what he's done, wishes there were some way to test what he thinks is happening, wishes he could know whether his own silence indicates strength or cowardice. But he doesn't believe wishes come true.

At lunchtime he checks his box outside the hospital's mail room. Inside is an envelope addressed to SCUM'S BROTHER.

He throws it away without opening it.

Today, he thinks.

Let it be today.

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Darrell (6)

He lies on the bed with his right hand on his chest. He can't feel a heartbeat. When he tries to lift his right arm, it feels as though it were wet clay.

Just as his hand begins to rise, he becomes aware of a moaning sound, like the vibrations of thick power lines in a storm, and has the unshakable feeling that it's calling him.

The sound grows louder as he fights to make his muscles take him out of bed. He tries to count seconds as he begins to move toward the door, but he loses count after three hundred. His arms and legs feel numb, and he can hardly control the crutches.

By the time he reaches the gray desert, he knows the sound is coming from the porch. The front door is open a few inches.

The moan throbs as if it were his missing heartbeat. It's the only thing he's aware of, the only thing he feels. The crutches swing past his body as if part of a huge, slow, cosmic gear.

When he's finally crossed the desert, he leans on his left crutch and uses the right one as a pry bar.

The door pivots as if it were a slab of stone. When it's open halfway, Darrell sees Paul on the porch, his mouth open wide, his bruised face contorted in rage and pain. The moan isn't a moan at all, but a scream.

A seventeen- or eighteen-year-old stranger is behind Paul, holding the child's elbows. Three other teenage males are turning toward the door. Darrell recognizes two of them. One is a beefy, redheaded guy named Johnson who Kaye said was always bothering her. The other is one of Kaye's cousins.

Darrell begins pushing the screen door open with his crutch, and he smells soured beer.

He knows what's happened. The seniors graduated last night. Kaye was probably eulogized, and these guys have been cursing the son of a bitch who killed her. Somewhere toward morning they decided that if the law wouldn't get him, they would. He deserves to have his shit kicked to hell, one of them would say. She dies, and all he gets is a busted leg and a cushy place to flop. He's alone there during the day . . .

The moaning gets louder and higher in pitch before it's overpowered by the sound that comes from Johnson's mouth:

"MMMUUURRR . . . DDDEEERRR EEERRR . . ."

Kaye's cousin reaches for the screen door.

Darrell sees it all coming, coming even more slowly than it did the night of the accident. And like that night, he can do nothing to stop it.

Johnson drags Darrell out onto the porch.

Paul is struggling. He must have

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heard them and come out to see who it was. If only he'd stayed inside. If only he hadn't gotten into the fight at school. If only Kaye hadn't died . . .

The crutches drift down and bounce off the narrow boards. It's as if they've fallen to the surface of a tiny wooden planet.

A fist comes toward Darrell's face. The fingers are tanned and thick, the knuckles creased like dry leather. A silvery thing with a red stone hits him below his left eye.

He feels nothing at first. For a few minutes it's as if his face simply tries to change shape.

Only when the blow is long past does the pain come. It starts as a fuzziness at the edge of vision, then creeps in until all is dark except a white-hot point at the center.

Then that point bursts, and its fragments shred tissue as if they were pieces from the window of Darrell's pickup truck.

The boards of the porch press against his right shoulder until his collarbone aches. A cold metal tube burns across his cheek. As the momentum of his fall turns him onto his back, he tastes a thick, metallic saltiness. It's as if he's been chewing green copper.

The blackness flows back to the periphery, and Darrell sees Paul kick the ankle of the stranger holding him.

The teenager stumbles back, still clutching Paul, and falls off the edge of the porch. An hour later, he lands on the boy, pinning him against the sidewalk.

Darrell begins yelling, and the sound is exactly like Paul's scream. He tries to get up, but Johnson's foot kicks him back down.

Before a second kick can land, Darrell finds a crutch and rams it into Johnson's groin. Then he swings it at the other two, and they jump off the porch and float down like cottonwood seeds. The one who fell on Paul is getting up, and Darrell sees that the child's lower right leg is unnaturally bent.

Johnson stumbles off the porch after the others, and they run away as though they were crawling.

Darrell tries to go down the steps on one crutch and falls, landing beside Paul. The boy's face is wet with tears and blood.

Gradually, Darrell pushes himself up to his knees, leaving the crutch on the ground, then slides his right arm under Paul's thin shoulders and his left arm under the boy's thighs. The lift takes hours.

When Darrell has Paul cradled against his chest, he brings up his left knee until the ball of his foot is against the sidewalk. Then he tries to drag his weighted right leg upright.

They fall twice. The moan is constant. But Darrell finally stands.

Pain stabs up his right leg as his plaster-encased foot presses down on the first porch step. It feels as if he's

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breaking the bone all over again, one cell at a time. The boy in his arms has the weight of a mountain.

It takes a day to climb the three steps to the porch.

Ten hours to reach the screen door.

Three days to open the door without dropping Paul.

A week to cross the gray desert.

Another week to lower the boy to the couch.

A year to find the hall telephone.

He feels nothing, hears nothing as he searches. He tastes blood. He misses Kaye.

He is in a slow universe, alone.

Frank (6)

He hangs up the phone and, hating himself, hopes this will be it. He hopes Darrell would understand, and that Paul isn't badly hurt.

He doesn't know if he believes in hope or not.

He calls Lori, then rides to the house in the ambulance.

Darrell (7)

It's dark outside his window.

Frank is talking to the shrink, who is standing in the corner looking unhappy. Lori is in the hall outside the doorway, her face in shadow. That's good, because Darrell doesn't want to see it.

Paul is in his room upstairs, asleep. Darrell imagines him lying there, his face discolored, frowning at a bad dream and trying to turn on his side. But he can't because of the cast on his lower right leg.

The tape recorder is in PLAY mode on its fastest speed, but Darrell can't make out any words. Barnes has given in to the "delusion" only to have his surrender meaningless.

It doesn't matter; Darrell knows the litany: "These things aren't your fault. It would be foolish to feel guilt over the acts of others . . ."

He thinks he also knows the subtext:

"I don't understand this. You're breathing too slowly. Your eyes move only at long intervals, and your hands move hardly at all. Yet there's nothing physically wrong with you. We'd know if there were, we would, we would . . ."

Sure, shrink. Nothing's wrong. Nothing's ever been wrong. A little kid got hell beat out of him and a shattered leg because of me. Big deal. I killed the woman I loved. Double big deal.

Sure, shrink. Everything's great. You don't stand like a wooden statue. Frank doesn't take a month to scratch his arm. Let's all run to the back twenty and dance on the headstones.

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Even as Darrell thinks, he knows his thoughts are slowing down to match his body. Two real-time days ago, he relived four years of high school while Frank took his blood pressure. Now, Barnes's long message has concluded before Darrell's finished imagining what it might be saying.

He has perceived the world as moving in slow motion, and his brain is finally adjusting to follow suit.

He wonders how it is that his *perception* has been operating at a rate different from his *thoughts* in the first place. Isn't perception simply the interaction of thoughts and senses?

He doesn't know, and he's too tired to try to figure it out. If he were able to hold a conversation, he'd put the paradox up to Barnes. But if he were able to hold a conversation, there wouldn't be a paradox . . .

Frank and the shrink have left the room and closed the door. It took them about six weeks.

The forty-six days since Kaye's death have been twenty years. Twenty years to relive the moment when the glass bits tore into her cheek. Twenty years to beat the face of a child and snap the bones of his leg.

Darrell's thoughts are interrupted by the aroma of roast beef. He focuses on it, savoring something undistorted.

Yet he can't imagine eating. His slow body has no need of energy.

He tries to listen to his heartbeat and hears nothing. He tries to listen to the blood pushing through his head and still hears nothing.

Eventually thought itself is too difficult. All that's left is smell, and even that fails when the aroma of the roast beef fades away.

He longs to dream as he did last night. In his dreams everything's normal — he can race someone, fight someone, make love to Kaye. Even nightmares are better than the thickness of his waking hours.

With a tremendous effort, he makes makes his eyelids close. And then he waits. In silence. In nothing.

But again sleep won't come on its own. Unless he can swallow a white pentagon, he'll lie awake, unable to move or even to think, for years.

Move, left arm. Down off the bed.

Nothing happens until he's repeated the command a hundred times. Then, numbly, his left arm slides toward the edge of the mattress.

Two more inches. Come on. Two more inches.

At last his arm falls over the curve of the sheet. A few minutes later, his knuckles scrape across the floor and bump against a leg of the nightstand.

Back. Back a foot. Over and over again.

By the time his fingers close around the cylinder, his whole body is sweating.

Up now. Up. Up. Please, please, up.

Eventually the message trickles

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down slow nerves to his arm muscles, and the pill bottle begins to rise.

How many should he take this time? he wonders. He wants to sleep long enough to dream of loving Kaye and playing basketball with Paul, deep enough to forget what he's done to them.

A shudder rumbles through him as his hand rises over his face, and blackness reappears like a ring surrounding his vision.

Is this sleep? Do I need —

The cylinder tips, and the loose cap tumbles off like something ejected from a spacecraft.

Mouth open, concentrate —

The pills drift out and fall around Darrell a thousand times more slowly than snowflakes in still air.

The blackness washes over him, and he feels inexplicably, wonderfully peaceful.

Frank (7)

He stands with Barnes outside the door to Darrell's room. The psychiatrist is biting his lower lip and staring at the floor. Frank, not knowing if he should, has given in and shown his friend the contents of the green notepad. He's glad that Lori is already upstairs in bed.

He opens the door and sees white flakes on his brother's chest.

He has the stethoscope out of the bureau drawer and is beside Darrell in an instant, searching for a pulse. He's aware of Barnes standing anxiously behind him.

"Nothing," he mutters as if it were a curse. He's about to start CPR and tell Barnes to call for an ambulance, then stops himself.

"Give me your watch," he says instead.

"I thought you couldn't find a pulse," Barnes murmurs.

"Give it to me."

Barnes hands him the watch, and Frank holds it close to Darrell's lips.

"What in — " Barnes begins.

"Shut up and count the pills," Frank says.

The psychiatrist obeys. "Thirty-eight," he announces after half a minute.

Frank does some swift arithmetic, then says, "Go to the bathroom and flush them down the toilet."

He looks up and sees his friend staring at him. "I'll do no such thing," Barnes says.

"See if you hear anything, then." He moves aside but keeps the watch half an inch from his brother's slack mouth.

Barnes takes the stethoscope and tries for three minutes.

"He's gone, Frank. No heartbeat, no respiration."

"Right. Drug overdose."

Barnes scowls. "If these are the tabs I prescribed, he hasn't taken any. One, maybe."

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"He took them all. Flush them down the toilet."

The psychiatrist pulls off the stethoscope and looks away. "The county coroner will want an autopsy."

Frank shakes his head. "Four times I've done postmortems for Jack when he was too drunk to do them himself. I'll fill out and sign the death certificate, and he won't question it."

"Do you know what you're doing?"

"You saw my notes."

"And I can't believe your conclusions."

"Believe this," Frank says, and holds up the watch.

The crystal is fogged.

• • •

Late the next afternoon, Frank buries Darrell next to their parents. He has a brief moment of doubt as he uses the rented backhoe to scoop a thin layer of earth over the fiberglass canopy that was once a boat, but it goes away quickly. There is no life in the land of Hate. Happiness for the despised must wait until Hate is forgotten.

Seven times he drives the backhoe into the pasture and scatter-dumps the leftover dirt. Then he walks back into the cemetery and looks beneath a clump of spiderwort behind his parents' headstone to be sure the battery is connected properly. The ends of two hoses are hidden beneath the same clump, and he holds his hand over them for a half-second.

When he stands up, he sees that he's finished just in time. Barnes is bringing Lori and the kids in from the road.

They aren't religious, but Frank reads the Twenty-third Psalm anyway. Its words have an eerie significance, and he finishes in a quavering voice.

Paul hobbles over to the big cottonwood and leans against it, crying. Frank can't think of what to say; he knows the boy can't understand yet . . .

Darrell should've been Paul's father, he thinks.

Lori is beside Frank, holding the sleeping baby, and he feels her looking at him.

"I saw the time written on the receipt," she says, half-whispering. "You paid the deposit on the backhoe yesterday morning. Early."

"I was thinking of putting in a new septic tank."

Lori's eyes don't flinch. "Yourself? Who'd take your patients?"

Barnes makes uncertain noises in his throat.

"You got the casket awfully quickly," Lori continues, "and you cut through the paperwork as if you knew just what to do so you could bury him yourself and avoid embalm —"

"I've buried family before."

She seems about to argue, then looks over at Paul, who has dropped his crutches and pressed his forehead against the tree trunk. Her expression changes.

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"He needs you now," she says.

Hesitantly, Frank goes to his son and puts his hand on the boy's shoulders.

"Just remember him," he says hoarsely, "and he'll never be gone."

Paul turns and hides his bruised face against his father's chest.

Andrew Barnes picks a handful of spiderwort and puts it on the bare mound of earth.

"From the shrink," he murmurs.

After several minutes of silence, they begin walking back toward the road. Frank lags behind to close the gate.

The spiderwort bundle on Darrell's grave is being scattered by a gust of wind.

"When I learn what it is," Frank says too quietly to be heard, "and when those who hate you are gone . . .

He leaves the sentence unfinished.

Rest well, Black Sheep. I'll be back tomorrow evening. And the next evening. And the next. And if it takes that long, Paul and his children .. .. ..

He latches the gate.

Rest.

And in the shade of the cottonwood, Darrell rests, dreaming slow dreams of love throughout the century that will pass before his next heartbeat.

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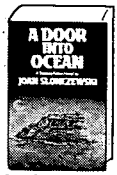

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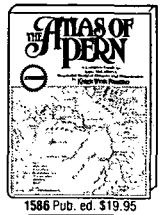

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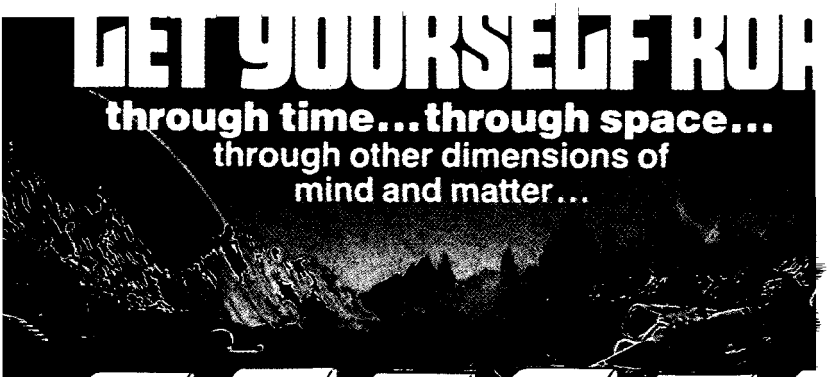

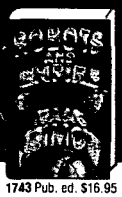

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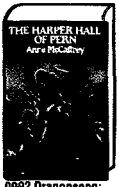

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